"The Frustrations of Wang Soo" —WILBUR S. PEACOCK

ANC

Short Stories

February 10th

25¢

If one man can be interested in romantic, unusual jungle adventure, other men can be interested in seeing that he finds just that . . . . . .

DEATH IS A WHITE GODDESS

by

Joseph W. Musgrave

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INFECTIOUS DANDRUFF, with its telltale flakes and scales, is an all too common ailment which should never be taken lightly.

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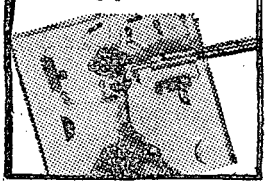

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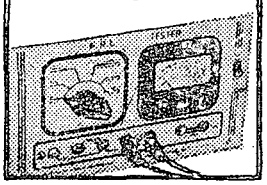

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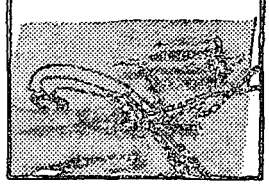

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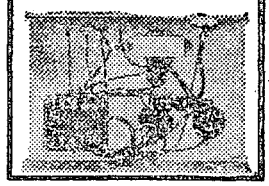

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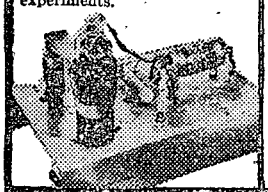

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THE BEST OF AMERICA'S ACTION ADVENTURE MYSTERY

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LAMONT BUCHANAN

February 10th, 1949

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EVERY AUTHOR'S FINEST AND LATEST STORIES NO REPRINTS

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The S. & W. Triple Lock and Its Descendants

MOST all ex-servicemen are more or less familiar with the Smith & Wesson .45 ACP caliber service revolver, or the Colt revolver chambered for the same service cartridge—each known as the Model 1917.

During the late war a great many M.P.'s and members of the Shore Patrol were seen on duty with these revolvers strapped on their hip. Both are fine weapons—but today let's examine the S. & W. product.

In 1919 at the beginning of the First World War our Army was in desperate need of sidearms. The regular service sidearm was (and with slight modification, still is) the Colt .45 Government Model of 1911 and production of this model could not be expanded to fill the requirements. This is, as you no doubt know, a semi-automatic pistol chambered for the rimless .45 Automatic Colt Pistol cartridge. As it would be impractical to have more than one caliber sidearm cartridge in use in the armed forces, the outlook for much-needed handguns was bleak.

Some bright person (I don't know who—but come to think of it I'll make it a point to find out) up at Smith & Wesson designed a half-moon clip that would hold three .45 ACP cartridges as a unit, to be loaded in a revolver chambered for this cartridge. In other words, instead of having to load six separate cartridges into a revolver, two units of three cartridges each could be loaded in the time ordinarily used in loading but two cartridges.

To handle this combination, the S. & W. people modified their famous New Century model—which is the gun I wanted to talk about in the first place!

Now this New Century model revolver (official name, Model .44 Hand Ejector) generally known as the Gold Seal Model or the Triple Lock is one of the finest (in my estimation) guns ever designed by Smith & Wesson.

It was first introduced in 1907 and was manufactured until around 1915. It seems that altogether around 20,000 were produced, approximately 14,000 in .44 Special caliber.

Normally S. & W. revolvers (having swing-out cylinder) are locked at the rear of the cylinder when closed ready for firing, and are also locked at the front end of the ejector rod under the barrel. In case of the New Century there is another lock which operates between the barrel lug and a hardened insert in the face of the yoke or crane. Thus this model is popularly known as the S. & W. Triple Lock. Pushing the thumb catch forward will release all three of the locks.

After the First World War the yoke lock was eliminated (to the disgust of many shooters) due to its expense. On the other hand, there were other reasons for leaving off the third lock—military authorities maintained that the yoke lock was a liability when the weapon was hard used in the field as dirt in the yoke lock might put the gun out of commission due to necessary close manufacturing tolerances. Also it was the opinion of many experts that the third lock was unnecessary, even in a heavy handgun, as it is a fact that a great many revolvers with the swing-out cylinder are locked in only one place.

At the present time the Triple Lock is practically a collector's item and it is getting more and more difficult to find a specimen in fine condition. It is a good accurate shooting revolver although very heavy hand loads should not be used in it as the cylinders on this particular line of S. & W. revolvers were not heat treated until late in 1921 after the Hand Ejector Second Model had been in production for over six years.

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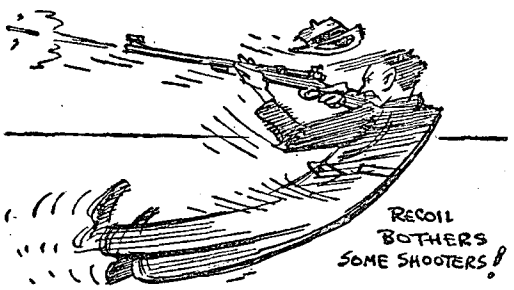
THIS second model was the New Century with the following changes—yoke lock and large barrel lug eliminated, cylinder and cylinder cut in the frame slightly enlarged.

The second model was also a mighty fine and very reliable heavy-caliber handgun. It was produced from 1915 until 1937 in .44 S. & W. Special, .44-40 Winchester and .45 Colt calibers.

The Hand Ejector 1926 Third Model was next of the lineal descendants of the Triple Lock. It differs from the Second Model in many small details including the installation of a hammer block and bringing back the heavy barrel lug as on its grandpappy, the Triple Lock.



The Third Model revolvers were chambered for the .44 S. & W. Special cartridge —although a few have been made on special order in .44-40 Winchester caliber. Production began on December 27, 1926.

It is interesting to note that this model was made up on special request for Wolf & Klar of Fort Worth, Texas, who took the first 3,500 and had exclusive sales rights at that time.

This Third or 1926 Model in target grade is also made in .44 S. & W. Special caliber only, and is one of the finest and most beautiful of the heavy handguns. It weighs just under 40 ounces, has a total length of 11¾ inches with a 6½ inch barrel. It may be had with 1/10 or ⅛-inch Patridge (square) type front (many experienced shooters prefer the ⅛-inch size) and a square notch rear sight, adjustable for windage and elevation.

Deliveries of this excellent revolver are expected to be made to retail stores by the time this is in print or soon thereafter.

I can hardly wait to get my hands on one of these new guns as the .44 Special cartridge has long been a favorite of mine, and this gun should be great for long-range shooting at 300 or 400 yards.

These distances are really not practical ranges but great fun, nevertheless, and it is surprising the number of hits that can be made with practice. I once saw a shooter break four 8-inch plates at 220 yards with eight shots, this not from a sitting or rest position, but from the orthodox standing position using one hand!

The .44 Special is our best heavy-caliber cartridge, being especially designed for use with smokeless powder, unlike many of our revolver cartridges which were originally designed for black powder. It is really the outgrowth of the .44 S. & W. Russian cartridge which is one of the outstanding revolver cartridges of all time. Originally designed in black powder days, it is today loaded with smokeless and remains one of our most accurate revolver cartridges.

Incidentally, the Russian cartridge may be fired in the .44 S. & W. Special revolver.

Except for length the .44 S. & W. Special cartridge has the same measurements as the .44 S. & W. Russian, and strange as it may seem, the ammo factories load these two cartridges to the same muzzle velocity. But, the .44 Special may be hand loaded to higher speeds with corresponding higher striking energy.

I have seen the .44 Special cartridge loaded so heavily that when fired (by remote control) in a fine revolver flame seemed to fly from all parts of the gun. Of course, this pratcice is not to be recommended. As a matter of fact, it is a good idea to load so that pressures will not go much over 15,000 pounds to the square inch. When using revolvers in new or excellent condition some shooters go quite a bit over this figure, but the results in added speed ordinarily are not worth the risk to be taken.

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By

JOSEPH W. MUSGRAVE

I

IT WAS a shabby, rotten scheme from the beginning. It showed how low Jim Wiley had fallen. As to myself—well, I was only making a dollar.

Besides, you can't give too much of a damn about your own or anybody else's morals after you've spent twenty years pushing a rusty, wheezing river boat back and forth over the same stinking stretch of African river.

I was running a boat for hire, and if a skunk like Jim Wiley wanted to pay good money in advance for my services, then the rest of the business was none of my concern. It was up to that skinny little sucker

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White Goddess

There Are Always Some People Who Haven't Any Scruples — None Whatsoever at All . . . .

Johann Drake to look out for himself and his bankroll. Nobody but a jackass would have let Wiley con him into backing such a ridiculous venture, anyway.

Though the name "Wiley" rings a familiar note with you, you probably haven't identified him yet. That's easy to explain. From the way I've described him, he wouldn't sound like the much-publicized explorer and adventurer, "Tiger" Jim Wiley.

Well, he was a four-flusher from the start, and I knew it when I first laid eyes on him. He was riding high then, gathering money and publicity with both hands. But by the time of the incident I'm relating, everybody but the public had found him out.

You have to give him credit. He'd bilked scientific societies, moving picture com-

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panies, publishers, the press and any number of wealthy men before finally they learned what a fraud he was. With great fanfare, he led expeditions to every little-known part of the world, returning with startling tales of his adventures and with vast quantities of pictures of himself in heroic poses. And buried beneath the rivers of publicity he spouted was the fact the actual objectives of his expeditions never were achieved.

It was a tribute to his own cageyness that even after he found himself out in the cold, there never was a single public denunciation of him. The Tiger Jim Wiley bubble didn't burst suddenly, it just gradually deflated.

Having enthusiastically hailed him once, the groups who had backed him couldn't afford to tell the truth, because in discrediting Wiley, they would be discrediting themselves.

Like any beast of prey, when Wiley found that the big game was exhausted, he turned with good appetite to the small. Johann Drake was one of the rabbits he turned up.

Wiley had sent me word a month before that he wanted to charter my boat. I didn't pay any particular attention, but sure enough, I hadn't been tied up at Azan two hours before he came stomping aboard. I was dozing in a chair on the little strip of raised deck I called the bridge. Tambi, one of my black boys, shortly before had wet down the canvas shading me from the sun, and with half a bottle of gin in me, I had a fair delusion of comfort.

"Dirk! Dirk Morris! How are you, my old friend?" I heard Wiley call in that breathless, rasping voice of his.

WITH as guarded a gesture as possible, I dropped my hand down to the bottle and slid it under my discarded shirt. Tambi, who was sleeping in a narrow strip of shade by the rear cabin, roused and brought a chair for Wiley.

At the unspoken question in Tambi's sullen face as to whether he should bring two glasses, I scowled warningly. But even as Wiley was pumping my hand in greeting, he bellowed for the black to fetch glasses. Before I had a chance to get angry, Tiger Jim pulled a bottle from a pocket of the hunting jacket he always affected and shoved it at me.

Naturally, when a man invites you to drink with him, you have to show some warmth, so I smiled and waved him to sit down. A warning bell rang in the back of my mind, however. Whenever Tiger Jim began buying drinks, it was time to go on guard. He was a great one to spend money on himself and women, but he never laid a dollar out for another man unless he expected a hundred-fold return.

He complimented my looks, the looks of my boat, and recalled merry times which we'd never had together. He was so obvious it was enough to make a man sick, but the liquor was better than I could afford, so I played dead until the botle was empty.

Then I put my glass down. Maybe I wasn't too polite, but suddenly I was mighty sick of Wiley.

"Now that we've had tea," I said, "just what the hell are you after?"

He didn't like it. You could see how very much he didn't like it. But he took it, and when he did, I knew he needed me in the worst way. That meant I'd have the whip hand when we came to talking money, so I relaxed.

"That's a queer way to talk to a friend, Dirk," he said, trying to force hurt innocence into that rasp of his. "I'm bringing a fellow into this area soon—a fellow with a little money—and I was thinking of throwing you some business for old time's sake."

He pushed his lips together, looked downriver toward the falls, allowing time for his words to sink in.

"From what I hear, things haven't been too rushing for you," he added meaningfully.

"I've still got the only safe, easy way to get through 'The Big Green'," I assured him.

The Big Green was one of the meanest stretches of jungle in the Congo. It had made me my living for twenty years, because my boat was the only one on the river and I was one of the very few white men who had the friendship of the Kongoni tribesmen. Maybe I didn't exactly have their friendship, but I had brought the medicine which once saved their paramount chief,

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Tyaika's life. Primitive men don't forget a debt of that kind.

It wasn't likely either that I would have any competition within my lifetime. The Azani River was only navigable for about seventy miles and nowhere in that seventy miles did it connect with any other waterway large enough to wade in. It began nowhere and it went nowhere.

The only reason for a boat being on it was that a French rubber combine had brought it up from the coast in parts. They had hired me to run it between their plantations upriver and the falls at the village of Azan. It took seven years for the jungle and falling prices to bankrupt them. I got the boat for practically nothing.

"You've got an air-tight monopoly, all right," said Wiley. "But I hear there's one thing wrong; nobody's interested in going through The Big Green anymore."

The so-and-so was dead right, of course. The plantations were gone. The rush of prospectors started by the discovery of two egg-sized diamonds by a half-witted black by had fizzled out without a single strike.

Worst of all, Zita, the Kongoni wizard had succeeded in stopping all trade between tribesmen and white men. He hated whites and worked steadily to foment trouble for them. But where other traders were stopped cold by the witchdoctor, he couldn't touch me because I had Tyaika's protection.

Tyaika was old, and blind to much that went on about him, but the tribe almost worshipped him for his past greatness, so Zita dared not disobey his edicts.

"Dirk Morris always makes a dollar," I growled. "Now take off Little Red Riding Hood's goody-goody cape and let's get to the point. You're not trying to do me a favor! You want one."

He looked plenty mean for a moment, and make no mistake, Wiley was a big devil and tough. But I had him gauged right. He covered up with a booming, insincere laugh.

"All right, so I want one," he agreed. "It's nothing to get excited about. You act like I wanted you to murder somebody."

"I wouldn't put it past you," I told him frankly.

He gave me that laugh again. "No, Dirk, it's really nothing. And I've got money in my pocket to pay."

TO emphasize his words, he pulled out a fat wallet and riffled the bills for me.

"All I want is for you to take a client and me into the Big Green, and then stay with us so we can use the boat as headquarters. I'll pay you thirty-five dollars a day, guarantee a month's rental and furnish all provisions."

He leaned back in his chair triumphantly, as though he had swiftly dissipated all my suspicions, but he was a bit too tense and watchful to suit me.

"Are you sure that's absolutely all I'd have to do?" I asked.

His eyes ran past me. "Well, you'd have to drink with me," he said jovially. He sort hesitated, clearing his throat. "And there'd be a couple of small things we'd keep just between us."

Now we were getting to the meat of the proposition.

"Like what?" I questioned softly.

He measured me uneasily. "Uhh—there's a girl I want to take upriver first. And—well—I don't want my client to know about her."

It sounded foolish to me. "That's a new one," I said. "What is he, a preacher, or are you merely getting too old to risk competition?"

"That's beside the point," he snapped. "What I want to know is will you play ball with me. Understand now, you don't get a dime if he finds out about the girl from you or your blacks!"

I shrugged my shoulders. "Suits me," I said. "Hide a girl under every bush in the jungle if you like. Seems to me, though, you must have gone off your nut. Great Scot, you're just going to be out a month. Surely, you can rough it for that length of time."

He showed sour amusement.

"What was the other item I'd have to blink at?" I asked. "If it's no worse than that, we can certainly do business."

"You'll find it a very easy thing to do," he said softly. "Right in your line. All you need to do is tell a small lie."

He couldn't hide the pleasure he took in making that remark.

"Oh yeah," I said. "I guess I'm to swear the girl is a long-lost cousin of yours if the sucker finds out about her."

"Get that part out of your mind," he said peevishly. His eyes were unusually watch-

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ful. "This is a business, not a pleasure trip, from my angle." He was uneasy about something.

HE reached in his pocket, drew out a square paper envelope, handed it to me.

"You're to say you took this picture about a year ago," he confided. "Make out it was one of those lucky breaks an amateur photographer gets. You'll say it confirms rumors you've been hearing from the natives for years."

I opened the flap on the envelope, and pulled oue a dog-eared, slightly yellowed picture. It was a typical amateur job, fuzzy and off-center, but the central figure was clear enough.

"Say, what the devil are you up to?" I demanded.

A tough looking group of blacks, armed and painted for war, stood on the bank of a river in the snapshot. In the middle of the natives and standing nearest to the camera was a gorgeous looking white girl clothed, or rather unclothed, in a few stamp-sized pieces of leopard skin and a high feather headdress. And I believe she was holding a spear, too.

"That girl is the whole reason my client is making this expedition," Wiley said quite calmly, matter-of-factly. "He wants to find her. Naturally, if you have a picture you took of her from your boat, he'll know he can find her in The Big Green. Simple enough, isn't it?"

Frankly, I was speechless for a moment. Then I began to comprehend.

"Is this the girl you want me to take upstream?" I asked incredulously, tapping the snapshot.

He leaned back in his chair, laughing nervously.

"Of course," he said.

"He thinks she's some kind of wild girl, is that it?" I asked.

Wiley rolled his tongue around inside his cheek, leaned forward confidentially.

"He *knows* she's a jungle goddess," he said, "a secret legend among the blacks of many tribes and that I spent two years tracking down rumors of her existence."

I shook my head dazedly. "You really are a prime crook!"

He sat up abruptly, his face reddening.

"There's nothing wrong with what I'm doing," he said hotly. "If a client wants to kill a lion, you find him a lion. If he's interested in orchids, you find him orchids."

He jutted his heavy chin at me belligerantly.

"This fellow is interested in having one of those unusual, romantic jungle adventures he's read about in the Sunday supplements," he continued, "and I'm going to see that he finds exactly what he's looking for."

"But nobody's that big a fool," I objected.

"This guy, Johann Drake, is!" he declared emphatically. "And he's got a hundred thousand dollars to spend to prove it!"

He hauled out his wallet, flourished it.

"Now do you want to play ball or not?" he demanded.

I SAT there, watching the wallet and turning the matter over in my mind. It was a pretty sorry scheme, but still, if I didn't do it, Wiley would merely get someone else to help him. I could see that he'd picked The Big Green as the grounds for his con game because he wouldn't have to worry about other white men spoiling his pitch.

And no doubt, he'd figured, too, that I needed money bad enough to go along wiih him. But he could stage it elsewhere if he had to, and he wouldn't have much trouble finding a confederate to help him.

"Why not?" I said. "I might as well have the money as some real crook."

He beamed, slid the wallet back in his pocket. "I'll bring her on board after dark."

He stood up to go.

"Ahhh—the money!" I reminded him. He tried to argue me out of taking the full month's guarantee in advance, but he didn't get anywhere.

"And incidentally," I said, as I counted it. "I'd never think of carrying a roll like this upriver with me. I'll leave it in a safe place in the village."

His eyes narrowed. He knew what I meant. He cursed me savagely and flung away.

My grin died as soon as his back was turned. "I wouldn't put it past him," I thought.

I was still holding the picture. I looked

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at it a long time, and gradually I began feeling better about taking part in such a lousy scheme. The girl was really something to have about.

II

I HAD Tambi wash and patch a sweatshirt and my best pair of white ducks. I never could get used to having a black flourish a razor around my throat, so I shaved myself. I thought I looked pretty good when they came aboard that night.

The girl was all the picture promised, and more. She was dark-haired, olive-skinned, with eyes as green as sea water and every bit as cool. You know the kind, young and hard.

She couldn't have been much more than twenty, but you could feel that she knew more about men than most women ever learn. You could see it in every line of her. And you could see, too, that she hated men's guts, individually and collectively.

The boat had one cabin, a narrow rectangle with four bunks and a small table in it. Wiley waited until we got down there to introduce her. I had been nervous about her reaction to the cabin, but other than a slow glance around, she failed to show any interest at all in the sleeping arrangements.

"Meet my good friend, Saaru," introduced Wiley at last. "And Saaru, this is Dirk Morris. He's with us on this."

"Glad to know you," I said, "but understand I'm not with anybody on anything. I'm selling transportation, and that's all."

Wiley laughed. "Don't worry about Dirk," he assured the girl. "He's with us. He has an odd little way of fooling his conscience."

"It's always a pleasure," she said acidly, "to meet an honorable man." She walked over and tested one of the bunks. "Now if you'll excuse me," she said, turning her back on us, "I'm going to sleep. Tramping around the jungle isn't my idea of restful fun."

And without any further ado, she pulled her dress over her head, kicked off her shoes and climbed under the mosquito netting. She pulled a sheet over her and turned on her face.

I was roused by Wiley's saying, "Don't turn in, yet. Dirk has to go up on deck, and I thought we'd sit here and have a few drinks together."

"Our agreement was very plain," she answered. "I'm paid to run around the jungle in a few beads for the benefit of your sucker. Except for putting that act on, I'm to do exactly as I please. All right! I want to sleep, so get!"

Wiley's tan got several shades darker in the lamplight, and anger began jerking the pulse in his throat.

"Listen! You damn little belly dancer," he exploded, "don't start putting on airs with me. Wonderful gratitude I get for helping a tramp! I should have let you go on getting kicked around in Port Nairobi so maybe you'd appreciate somebody doing you a decent turn."

She raised her head enough to give him a none-too-pretty raspberry, one with all the Brooklyn trimmings.

"Don't hand me that Good Samaritan stuff," she threw back. "I was the only female you could hire for your dirty scheme who didn't look more like a crocodile than a woman. I've seen those 'bags' along the waterfront. Put them in a grass skirt and they'd scare your precious Johann Drake to death."

She was plenty tough, but she wasn't dumb. It tickled me to see a woman punch Wiley around. He prided himself on being a lady-killer. He glowered at her, his fists knotted, but after a moment he stamped up on deck.

I WENT over to the lamp, chuckling to myself. When she didn't hear me leave, she raised herself up and looked at me like I was something that had just crept out of the woodwork.

"Not you, too?" she said disgustedly.

"Naw!" I said. "I'm putting out the lamp. Kerosene costs money out here, and it's money I'm interested in—just money."

"That's the right philosophy, bub," she stated in a hard voice. "Keep thinking that way and we'll get along."

I turned the lamp down, blew it out.

"I wouldn't push Wiley too hard," I told her. "There aren't any cops out here to call and he's just the type to slap a woman around. For your own good, let him down a little easier."

She gave a mirthless laugh.

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"I'll let him down six feet underground the day he gets tough," she said. "I've been handling two-bit sports like him all my life."

Her voice didn't sound as unfriendly toward me.

"You're mighty young—and-and—pretty to be at Port Nairobi," I suggested, trying to keep the curiosity out of my tone. "How come you to be in that hell-hole?"

There was a long silence. She knew what I was thinking. A woman couldn't ride the skids much further down than Nairobi.

"I'd say that was entirely my business," she said with abrupt venom. "Now let me alone, will you?"

I went on deck feeling like I'd had a pail of cold water thrown in my face. Wiley was leaning on the rail, staring at the dark shore. Somewhere in the darkness a native thumped erratically at a hand drum. The sound came faintly above the distant roar of the falls.

"Is she really a dancer?" I asked him.

"She says so!" he growled. Then, after a pause, he added, "I've got my own ideas."

"What was she doing at Nairobi?" I persisted.

"She was in the show at the Blue Fan."

I gave a surprised whistle. I knew Adolf Geiser, the brutish, heavy-bellied German who ran the Blue Fan. He wasn't the kind of guy who'd let a prize pigeon like Saaru get away from him. And he wasn't the kind of a guy to have as an enemy!

"I'm surprised Geiser would let an attraction like her get away."

He spat over the rail. "I didn't ask him. All you have to do with her kind is show them the color of your money and they follow you off."

"You took money out of Geiser's pocket, and maybe something else, when you took her," I said. "He'll fix you for good if he gets a chance."

He scoffed at me.

"Don't fool yourself," he rasped. "He knows Tiger Jim Wiley is no wharf-rat he can kick around. I ran into him twice after she walked out on her job and he didn't say a word.

It didn't sound right to me, but Wiley was there, whole and sound, so he must be telling the truth.

He was still sore at Saaru. For the fun of it, I searched for something complimentary to say about the girl.

"You've got to give her credit," I pointed out. "The kid's got nerve to come out among the Kongoni. I couldn't name you many men, let alone women, who'd chance it these days."

He snorted disparagingly.

"Saaru's not due any credit," he snapped. "She doesn't know the Kongoni hate the sight of a white skin. She thinks they are as tame as those coast natives I hired for that faked picture."

He chuckled grimly.

"And you're not to tell her differently," he warned.

"That's a lousy thing to do," I said. "Don't you know if anything happened to me, it would cost that girl her life. Only Tyaika's debt to me protects her. She's entitled to know the risk she's taking."

He wheeled slowly around, his face shoved close to mine.

"Don't talk foolishness," he growled. "What people don't know, don't hurt 'em. There wouldn't be a cent in this for either one of us without the girl."

He was right, of course. But it wasn't the sort of thing I'd want on my conscience. In his place, I couldn't have gotten a good night's rest.

"I always know what I'm doing," he blustered. "Besides, you're hardly the person to be giving me Sunday School talks."

We were interrupted by a sudden babble of native voices in the stern, erupting into frightened screams and the crash of gear. By the time I reached the blacks, Tambi had floored one of Wiley's four porters with a club and had the other three cornered against the rail.

I jerked the club out of his hands and pulled him away. He didn't resist. The newcomers were thoroughly cowed, so he already had accomplished his purpose—and mine. Speaking for Wiley's benefit, I cursed Tambi for a troublemaker, but under the cover of the darkness I patted my boy approvingly on the back.

Around a crook like Wiley, I wanted my own black to be top dog among the bearers. It gave me added protection and it didn't cost a dime. With Tambi running the backstairs show, I'd have a good check on Tiger Jim.

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I went back and apologized to Wiley for the incident, but he wasn't particularly interested. He couldn't trouble himself about blacks.

THE trip was routine. We'd run during the day, anchor in mid-stream at night. You have to be able to see what you're doing when you buck the Azani River. It's full of shifting mud banks and the channel squirms around from hour to hour like a snake.

The fourth morning I nosed the boat up to a bare stretch of bank and told Wiley we had arrived. "Yeah," he said, looking at the blank wall of jungle. "Where's the chief, then?"

"He's the boss here," I told him. "We go to Tyaika. He doesn't come to us."

"How'll we find him without a guide?"

I laughed. "Don't worry about that," I said. "Unless I miss my bet, you could throw a rock anywhere along the jungle's edge right now and hit a Kongoni warrior. Of course, it would be the last rock you'd ever throw."

He looked startled, and considerably sobered. Then he recovered, saying "Aw, you're joking."

As he spoke, warriors began moving out of concealment onto the bare stretch of ground. Big warriors. Not a one of them under six feet. Those painted devils with their tasseled spears and weirdly marked shields never failed to give me a turn as many times as I'd seen them.

A native in a scarlet, feathered headdress gestured with his spear, speaking rapidly in Kongoni.

"He says for us to come ashore," I translated.

As I watched him, a faint sheen of perspiration became visible over Wiley's face.

"You're sure you can handle Tyaika?" he questioned.

"If you don't get out of line, I can," I warned him. "Let me do the talking. Load your boys with those presents and we'll be on our way."

THREE hours later we faced Tyaika in the council hut of his kraal. He was a grim, fierce, old man, deadly as a leopard when angered, cold and suspicious under any other circumstances. Battle wounds had stiffened his right leg, made his left arm useless.

He listened woodenly to my long and flowery greeting, barely glanced at the presents Wiley placed one by one before him. The only time I detected a glitter of interest in his eyes was when they touched Saaru. He couldn't quite figure out what her presence meant.

At last, he interrupted me with a curt flick of his hand. "I have not forgotten my debt to you," he said harshly. "What is it you wish this time?"

There was no point in lying to the old man. I told him Wiley's crooked scheme in its entirety, laid it right on the line. Not a muscle in Tyaika's face shifted, only those black, unblinking eyes of his moved, but you could feel his contempt for white men.

He stroked the thin, purple line of his mouth, his glance going back and forth from Wiley to the girl to me. I had told him that Johann Drake was a great lord among white men and that we wished to humble him with our scheme.

"I could do it," he conceded slowly. "So long as locust eats locust, it is no concern to me."

I had asked that for two hands of days he assign the inhabitants of one kraal to do Saaru's bidding. That didn't mean that we would greatly upset their normal routine, but only that they would make a show of worshipping her, with a few dances and feasts thrown in to impress Drake and make the blacks themselves happy.

But as the old man spoke, a lean, gaunt figure pushed through the stolid line of guards behind Tyaika's stool, bent to whisper in his ear. The newcomer wore a monkey-skin loincloth and tufted circlets of the same skin about his wrists and ankles. In his hand was his badge of office, a long carved stick, decked with brightly colored feathers and topped by a chalk-white human skull.

He was Zita, the witchdoctor, the most powerful man in The Big Green after Tyaika, and certainly the most fanatical white-hater.

As he finished whispering, he straightened, never deigning to touch me with that unblinking lizard's stare of his, but his devil-stick gave three almost imperceptible twitches, counting off each of us whites.

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What secret incantation Zita mouthed as he flicked the wand, I could not know, but I would have taken bets it was a curse or evil spell of some kind. It was a small, infantile thing, yet it sure stuck in a person's craw.

"Then we can count on your help," I suggested, made uneasy by the silence in which Tyaika mulled over the wizard's advice. "I told my companions that the friendship of the Great Black Elephant of the Kongoni was a thing of glory. I told them that you would no more hold back your help in my time of need than I would have held back mine that time when the death-sickness was on you."

Tyaika leaned forward, his lips tightening. He didn't like being reminded he owed his life to me.

"You are asking a favor not of me, but of my people," he said, bitterly. "They are the ones who would have to humble themselves by appearing to submit to a woman's rule—and a white woman, at that. My debt to you is my own; my people do not share in it."

He had always scaled my requests down to reasonable proportions, yet this was the first time he had ever refused me flatly. I tried to argue, for with sudden fear I could foresee Wiley demanding back his money. Wiley already was hissing questions out of the corner of his mouth, sensing that something was wrong.

Arbuptly, Zita spun, stabbed the skull-stick at me, his lips drawn in a sneer. "Always you white men ask, but never you give! Why not try making a fair bargain one time, giving value for value?"

The embarrassment of having that black dango speak like that to me before so many people confused me. The only thing I could think to say was to point out the many presents we had brought.

"Bah!" snapped Zita. "What is such trash to a leader of warriors?" He contemptuously kicked over two boxes, sprawling the cheap glass jewelry, the skimpy rolls of red and yellow cotton cloth over the floor.

AN approving murmur went up from the warriors crowding the council hut. Tyaika nodded his agreement with the wizard's words.

"For cripe's sake!" burst out Wiley. "They're gettin' mad as hell! What you tellin' 'em?"

I had to explain it hastily to him, trying to make him think it was nothing unusual, but only their regular method of wringing more presents out of me.

Saaru stepped close to listen. "Oh, yeah?" she said. "If you're such a smart bargainer, you'd better start bargaining and quit trying to get everything for nothing."

"That's right!" Wiley put in nervously. "Find out what they want. It can't amount to much. Probably a few more rolls of cloth to distribute to the villagers."

I took a deep breath and composed myself. It wasn't worthwhile letting a few blacks get me worked up. You have to expect some insults when you do business for worthwhile stakes.

"O Greatest Chieftain of the Jungle," I said, "speak out what is in your heart. I planned from the beginning to make suitable gifts to all named to work with us."

I spread my arms wide, composing my face to look as sincere as possible.

"I'm a generous man," I went on. "What gifts would you deem suitable to the tribesmen? Fine colored cloth? Strands of copper for ornaments?"

Tyaika watched me through half-closed lids, his head tilted back.

"One thousand guns!" he said softly.

"What?" I explained, thinking I'd misheard him.

"Give my warriors one thousand guns," Tyaika said, "and the girl may command any one of my kraals as she will."

He took me by such surprise that I know I looked foolish, my mouth dropped open, my eyelids blinking with a slow, stunned rhythm.

"What's he say? What's he say?" frantically demanded Wiley. When I told him, he exclaimed, "Why the old coot's insane! You've led me on a wild goose chase, Morris, telling me you could do business with the Kongoni."

Strangely, enough the girl wasn't the least bit excited.

"Don't get upset," she advised us coolly. "Tell him he must be joking to think we have such wealth, and that even if we did, we could never find that many guns. Explain about the law."

Tyaika heard me out without moving a

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muscle. Zita's face puckered condescendingly.

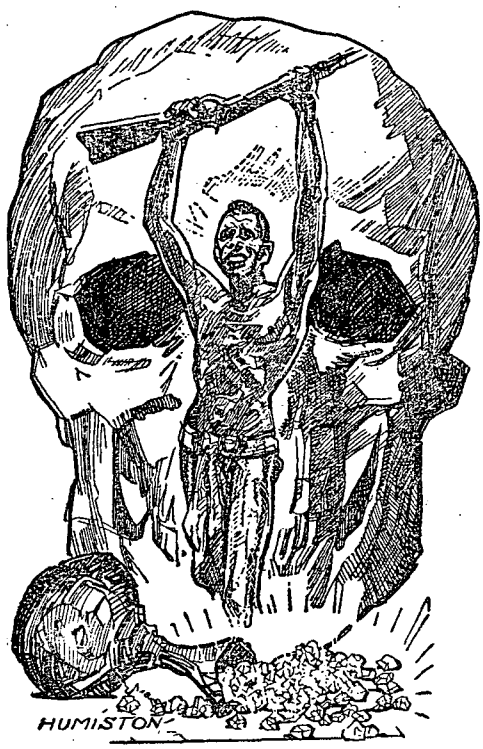
"Am I not the chieftain of the Kongoni?" the old man said. "I have wealth enough to buy a thousand guns and more. Your job is only to get the guns, bring them to me."

With that, I lost hope. He was really being difficult. The old fool imagined, I supposed, that his herds of mangy goats comprised a great fortune.

"All men do not value the same things equally," I muttered hollowly. "Things which you—"

Tyaika interrupted me, saying gruffly, "I understand well the ridiculous objects which arouse the white man's greed." He reached down beside his stool with his good arm, picked up a large clay vessel.

He balanced the container a moment, holding it up before me. Then he cast it at my feet, hissing, "Buy the guns! What remains will be yours!"



The clay pitcher shattered as it struck the ground, and like spattering gravel, its contents struck against my legs, bounced and rolled outward away from my feet.

Startled, I looked down. It was beyond belief! My heart gave a great leap and began to pound madly. My mouth was suddenly, painfully dry and my legs weak.

Beside me, Wiley stood, his eyes staring at the ground. In the slow, deliberate way of a hypnotized man he dropped to his knees. Then, suddenly his hands began to scrabble over the dirt like startled crabs.

"Diamonds!" he cried. "Look at 'em! *Diamonds*!"

The girl bent and snatched between his scuttling hands, peered breathlessly at the glittering objects she grasped. That rough, handmade vessel had been filled to the brim with diamonds.

III

"IT'S a fortune," hoarsely muttered Wiley, getting to his feet, his hands filled with dirt and gems. "We can't let this get away! Tell 'em we'll get the guns."

"You realize, don't you," asked the girl sarcastically, "the penalty for selling firearms to the natives?"

"Shut up!" he blurted. "You're not in on this. This is between Dirk and me, and we don't need any advice from you."

She gave a nasty laugh, her eyes narrowing.

"Don't fool yourself, honey," she said. "you get the lion's share on Drake, but any other pies are cut three ways—or they aren't cut at all!"

"Why, you—" he began, and I was afraid they'd go at each other right there in front of the blacks.

I stepped between them and hastily asked Tyaika's permission to talk the matter over in private with my friends. He smiled bleakly and gave his permission.

When we were away from the council hut, I told them, "Let's not fight about something we haven't even got. Now, Saaru is right about running guns. That's the one unforgivable sin out here."

"Aw, don't give us that saint act," growled Wiley. "You've sold many a gun to the blacks. If you've got any idea of scaring me off and then skulking back here to make a private deal with Tyaika, just forget it. We're putting this through together!"

Silently, I cursed his crooked, cunning soul. But outwardly, I only looked hurt that he should think such a thing.

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"This is a lot different from trading a couple of guns now and then to native hunters," I pointed out. "You've got to pay eight prices to a swindling smuggler, and for all you know, as soon as he's taken your money, he'll have one of his friends either hijack you or tip off the authorities to get a reward. And even if you get the guns, you're faced with bringing them this far inland without getting caught. You can't put a thousand rifles under your shirt, you know."

The girl was impressed by my words. "I believe we better lay off, if Morris says so," she advised. "He knows the situation better than we do."

A beetle landed on Wiley's sweaty face. Without taking his glance from me, he squashed the insect.

"Listen, sister, I know the 'money look' in Morris' eyes," he grated. "He wouldn't let those diamonds get away from him for anything in the world. He's just trying to con me out of my share, but I wasn't raised yesterday."

He reached out slowly and tapped me on the chest. The girl's eyes ran apprehensively from one to the other of us.

"Let's make a fair bargain," he said. "You have the contacts to buy the guns. I've got a foolproof way to get them to Tyaika without arousing suspicion. You know I'm not going to let you hog this whole thing, so let's work together and not have any trouble."

I REALIZED then that I didn't have a chance to frighten him off and handle the job alone. He was declaring himself in and I didn't like it. The Kongoni were my private preserve and he didn't have a right to a single one of those diamonds. But for the time being I had to play along with him.

"You mean you'd take the whole risk of transporting them," I asked, "and I wouldn't have to appear anywhere in the picture?"

He nodded, saying irritably, "Who could ask for a better deal than that?"

I thought to myself that I not only could ask for one, I was going to get it. But to his face, I said the deal was fair enough and that I'd work with him.

"I haven't heard a word said about Johann Drake," declared Saaru. "Are you fellows forgetting we've got him on our hands?"

"Say, that's right," I said. "We haven't time for that knucklehead. He's too small potatoes for us to worry with."

Wiley flashed his big teeth in a superior smile.

"We need Drake more than ever," he asserted. "He's the key to getting the guns here. No one would ever suspect that every other pack in a rich American's safari contained rifles."

I really had to marvel at Wiley's audacity. The girl argued that it would take so many natives to transport that many guns that the protection of Drake's respectability would be offset by the suspicious size of the safari.

"I don't intend to deliver a thousand," he said calmly. "Like all blacks, Tyaika expects us to bargain with him, and I imagine he'll settle for half that number. It's up to Dirk to convince him guns are more expensive than he thinks."

And after three hours of wrangling, that was exactly what I did. Diamonds meant nothing to Tyaika, but guns did. He agreed to trade the diamonds for five hundred rifles. He gave us half the gems, holding back the other half until delivery was completed.

But I made it part of the bargain that we weren't to hand the guns over until we were finished with Johann Drake and ready to leave the Big Green. Wiley and I had decided we might as well milk Drake of all we could. That way we could use his money to get out of the country, instead of drawing attention to ourselves by trying to get cash for the gems.

The girl remained with Tyaika to prepare the hoax. Wiley also left her two of his blacks. They could speak both the Kongoni dialect and English, and would serve as her go-betweens with the natives.

Coming downriver on the boat, you would have thought Wiley and I were the biggest buddies in the world. If I hadn't known him, I might have been convinced of his sincerity. But I did know him and made my plans accordingly.

He kept trying to learn where I meant to buy the guns, but I assured him it would mean my life to tell. "You go to the hotel," I told him, "meet Drake and organize your

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safari. I'll send Tambi to tell you when and where to pick up the rifles."

I convinced him we shouldn't be seen together, so we trekked separately from Azan to Port Nairobi. I slipped into town at night with Tambi and headed for the Blue Fan, but it was to the back door not the front that I went. You see, Adolf Geiser was the one man who could get me those guns.

And I had an idea that in a different way he could "get" Jim Wiley for me, too. And all for free, without his ever knowing the favor he was doing me.

That was why I hadn't wanted anyone to connect Wiley and me. It wasn't, as that fourflusher thought, to keep the authorities from suspecting he was going into the Big Green or to keep the crooks who sold the guns from knowing what became of them.

No, I'd just decided not to let Wiley muscle in on those diamonds. He had no right to them. Besides, it had occurred to me that if Wiley mysteriously disappeared, it would be very easy for me to handle Johann Drake by myself.

Don't misunderstand me. Much as I disliked Tiger Jim, I'd never personally put him out of the way or ask anyone to do it for me. That would be cold-blooded, mercenary murder and I wouldn't want a thing like that on my conscience any more than most men.

But there are some people who don't have any scruples. For instance, Geiser. And if from some innocent remark of mine, Geiser should take it into his head to do away with Wiley, then it wasn't my concern. It's enough for a man to keep his own hands clean, without worrying about the hands of a brute like the owner of the Blue Fan.

HANS, one of Geiser's numerous half-breed sons, was lounging by the door in the alley. He wasn't just taking in the air. The type of customers who patronized the Blue Fan often tried to disappear out the back door rather than pay their checks.

I told him I had important private business to discuss with the boss. None of Geiser's offspring dared refer to him as his father. Hans' reception wasn't any too respectful, but a few bills finally persuaded him to take me to Adolf's office.

I was a little nervous, so I asked him to bring me a pint to help pass the time until Geiser was free. It made me sore having to wait an hour for that big-bellied German, but I hid my feelings when he came in.

"Vot iss?" he scowled.

He reminded me of a great hog that had somehow learned to walk erect. His nervous, bulging eyes surveyed me with distaste. His head was clean-shaven, but his greasy pink jowls held a two-day growth of reddish stubble.

"I—I need some trade rifles," I said.

He exploded in a high, angry voice. "You call me avay vor dis—vor a vew damn guns!" He spat in the direction of my feet. "Efer again ven you bother me in my busy hours, I haff Hans teach you better. Now get out, dumkopft, before I break you like a stick!"

"But you don't understand," I said hastily. "I'm not buying three or four guns this time. I want five hundred."

He had half-turned to leave. He stopped suddenly, jolting the huge expanse of his belly. His head revolved slowly in my direction.

"Vot you say?" he said softly.

I repeated my words. He pulled at his chin thoughtfully with the bulbous fingers of one ham-like hand.

"You know, on guns alvays it iss cash," he said, eyeing me inquisitively.

"I know," I told him, "and I can pay for every dime of them."

Like a wan sun breaking through heavy rain clouds, a smile fought its way through the fat, heavy folds of his face. He shoved the door closed.

"Sit down, Morris," he said, his voice suddenly oily with solicitude. "Old friends like us vurk dis out easy." He pulled his own double-sized chair up beside me and jammed himself in it. "Vell, vell!! Alvays I say, vun day my friend, Morris, gets into bigtime." He patted my knee like a proud father. "So you got plenty cash?"

"Something better than cash," I said.

"Ohhh?" he breathed.

And pulling a small leather pouch from my pocket, I opened the drawstrings, poured out a handful of diamonds. . . . We made the deal for the rifles with remarkable speed, and for a far better price than I had expected.

Geiser couldn't do enough for me. He even agreed to wrap the guns in small,

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easily transported packs and deliver them to an isolated spot five miles inland from Nairobi. Of course, he cheated me in assessing the value of the gems, but not nearly as badly as I expected.

I'd been prepared for him to try to pump me about where the diamonds came from where the guns were to go. But he surprised me. He sent out for a fresh bottle, sat and chatted for over an hour about everything except those two subjects. He really acted friendly and decent.

Finally, I cautiously maneuvered the conversation around to affairs at the Blue Fan. "Say, I saw a girl a few days ago who said she used to work for you. Believe she called herself Saaru. Beautiful piece of machinery."

"Dot's so?" he said, and I noticed the nervous drumming of his fingers on the chair arm stopped abruptly. "Und ver you see dot vun?"

"She came through Azan with that four-flusher, Jim Wiley," I said casually. "Seems like he was preparing the ground for some rich joker's hunting trip, lining up local chiefs, arranging for beaters. Made me sick to see a dame like that wasted on Wiley."

He shifted in his chair. Like great fat spiders, his hands moved back and forth along his heavy belt, unconsciously testing its thickness.

"Dey ver coming back to Nairobi?" he asked.

"They should be here now, I imagine," I told him. "Seems to me Wiley said he was to meet his client at the hotel either today or yesterday."

He grunted, and though he said nothiig, an odd glitter came in his eyes. I finished my drink and got up.

"You take dem into Big Green?" he suggested.

"No," I lied, "he's trekking into Kalig country to the north. I really think he just came by Azan to show the girl off. He was certainly struttin' and boastin'."

His pink skin flushed darker. "In drouble can a big mouth get a man," he muttered.

"Yeah," I said, "bad trouble."

I told him goodbye and walked out. He was so engrossed in his thoughts he hardly glanced at me. I felt pretty elated about the way I'd handled the whole thing.

I knew a mulatto who ran a small place on the waterfront. I got a room there, and after sending Tambi to keep a watch on Wiley day and night, I settled down to wait.

TO MY great surprise, as the hours stretched into a day, and then two days, still nothing happened to Wiley. Tambi reported to me regularly on Wiley's comings and goings, and Geiser had more than ample opportunities to get his hands on the deadbeat. For instance, Wiley had to make numerous trips into the native quarter to recruit bearers for his safari. More than one of Geiser's enemies had disappeared abruptly while on a trip into the dingy black area.

Finally, I had to face the unpleasant truth. Geiser didn't mean to touch Wiley. It was hard for me to understand. I'd seen that murderous German slash a man to ribbons with a broken beer bottle in a quarrel over a two-dollar bar bill. You can imagine how the loss of Saaru should have affected him.

It made me furious. I could have sworn when I walked out of the Blue Fan that night that I would never have to set eyes on Wiley again. But there was nothing to do but face the facts.

In a foul mood, I sent Tambi to tell my dear "partner" where he could pick up the rifles. Then I loaded my boy up with a packful of bottles and headed back to the boat.

IV

TEN days later Wiley led Johann Drake and his safari into Azan. He strutted along in front of a double file of at least seventy blacks. And despite my personal feelings about him, once more I had to give the devil his due. Where, generally, a man couldn't pick up ten really topnotch bearers in Port Nairobi, Wiley had rounded up a full complement of the brawniest bucks you could hope to see.

After trekking all day in the burning heat, they swung along under the leaden weight of those gun-filled packs as if they were carrying nothing more burdensome than feather pillows. But Johann Drake wasn't doing any swinging. If ever I saw a man on the verge of physical collapse, it was Drake.

In a weaving, stumbling half-trot, his

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face cooked scarlet by the sun, Drake came trailing some ten yards behind Wiley. He was about average height, but with his thin, rounded shoulders, his narrow chest and spindly legs, he looked much smaller.

That ridiculous, sweat-drenched figure, with its gaping mouth working desperately for air, was the damndest sight I'd ever seen. Imagine the man paying the bills being run into the ground by his own safari! I was certain a boot-kisser like Wiley must be roaring drunk to pull a stunt like that. This one day's work could blow our whole expedition sky high.

Feverishly, I hurried ashore to greet them. "You drunken jackass," I growled under my breath to Wiley when he came up, "what in the world have you done to Drake?"

Jim, who had been beaming his best, professional "Teddy Roosevelt smile," looked shocked. Before he could speak, Drake reeled up beside him, put an arm on his shoulder for support. Wet strands of red hair drooped from beneath his sun helmet. The pale blue eyes in his long, hollow-cheeked face were half-closed.

"Better . . . did better . . . today . . ." he gasped, his legs threatening to collapse under him. "Great life . . . here . . . gonna like it."

He wasn't the least angry. The man was almost dead on his feet with exhaustion, and he wasn't angry. My mouth must have dropped open as wide as his.

"Mr. Drake is hardening himself up," said Wiley brusquely, his glance warning me not to look so stupefied.

"I'm afraid I couldn't manage anything but an incoherent stutter."

"Right!" panted Drake. "Not . . . usta . . . roughin' it." He made a determined effort to quiet his heaving chest as he shoved a limp, wavering hand at me. "Mr. Morris . . . glad . . . meet you. Heard . . . 'bout . . . picture."

Out of the corner of his mouth, Wiley muttered that we'd better get him aboard and into a chair before he cooled off and fell apart. He collapsed into that chair like an empty sack and I set Tambi to fanning him with a wet cloth. Wiley and I excused ourselves to direct the storing of the packs.

"You didn't tell me the guy was a dangerous nut," I accused him, as soon as we were alone."

"He's a little odd," soothed Wiley, "but he's not crazy."

I said, "Don't tell me that! Why, the condition he's got himself in, I doubt if he lives through the night."

Wiley shook his head in disagreement, and for once he looked actually impressed with someone besides himself.

"Frankly, I felt the same way about him our first day out," he confessed. "But you watch him! He'll be up and bouncing around the deck like a jumping bean tomorrow morning."

I wasn't convinced. A man who has been sitting behind a desk in a dark office most of his life can't turn himself into an olympic champion overnight just because he happens to be rich.

"I talked to him about it that first morning," Wiley explained seriously, "He claims it's all a matter of blood, the kind of ancestors back of a person that determines what you can stand, and what you can do, and how well you can do it."

That burned me up. "So he's a dirty snob on top of everything else," I said. "Because his family has always had money, he thinks that makes him a superman, better than common people like us."

Wiley pushed his hat back, scratched his head.

"That's the funny thing," he declared. "He's no blue blood. He tells me he was a slum kid, worked from the time he could walk, never went to school a day in his life."

Before I could digest this new information, I suddenly realized the boat was listing. I came to my senses in a hurry. Practically the whole safari was jammed on the deck.

"Jumping blue blazes!" I screamed. "This isn't any Atlantic liner. Get your blasted natives off of here before we go to the bottom."

Instead of leaving, after lowering their packs to my boys in the hold, the porters had packed themselves sardine-like around the narrow deck.

I DIDN'T wait for Wiley to act. I started shooing them ashore myself. They stood around on the bank looking upset and bewildered. Someone came up and gently touched my sleeve as I was telling them off.

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Turning, I looked up into the face of a coffee-colored giant. He still had his pack on his back.

"B'wana," he said in a deep, thick bass, "me and fellow-boys hire for whole trek. Mebbeso, one—two moons."

"I don't care about all that," I snarled. "You're damn sure not going to swamp my boat. Now get ashore and don't give me any more lip. This is the end of the line for you monkeys."

Most coast blacks have learned not to cross a white man, no matter what he says. But this big devil just stood there. I called Wiley, told him to pay them off.

"In order to get them to sign up," he confessed, "I did promise to keep them on for a month or more."

"Well, give them a couple of days' extra pay and send them packing," I directed. "It won't be the first or the last time they've been gypped."

With the smooth motions of a python, the huge black slid out of the neck and shoulder bands of his pack, and holding it effortlessly in his big hands, eased it to the deck.

"B'wana," appealed the black to Wiley, "be bad talk 'bout you if fellow-boys sent back Nairobi so too-quick after promise hire one—two moons."

The man's insolence rubbed Wiley the wrong way.

"Get the hell off the boat!" he bristled, his hand dropping threateningly to the showy revolver he was wearing. "We don't care anything about black talk!"

Yellow flecks of light sparked in the giant's unblinking eyes, but his brown face remained expressionless. With one broad-fingered hand, he stroked gently down the pack until he held upright on the deck before him.

"White b'wannas care, all right," he said in that abnormally deep bass, "if fellow-boys say what in packs."

Wiley and I both stiffened. "What's that? Whatta you mean?" I snapped.

"Ver' sorree," he said in the humblest fashion, "but this poor one's pack tear on limb. Some see what inside before can fix." He shook his head disapprovingly. "Some have ver' quick eyes."

My glance followed the stroking motion of his hand. He was running his finger up and down the neatly patched tear. Only it wasn't a tear. No limb ever cut that cleanly through a double thickness of canvas. That devil had deliberately sliced the pack open with his knife.

Wiley couldn't have looked more astonished if a tree had suddenly started talking to him. "Why, the begger is blackmailing us," he said, flustered. "He's threatening to expose us in Nairobi if I don't go through with my bargain."

I was thinking fast. "Tell me, boy," I said, keeping my voice low, "which ones saw inside the pack." If we could separate the sheep from the goats, we might get out of a bad spot.

"One would not know," he said looking thoughtfully at the crowd of blacks on the bank. "No, one would not know at all."

In a pig's eye, he didn't know. As long as we didn't know how many were in on his scheme, we couldn't turn any of them loose. And he would be safe from any action on our part, because if he came to harm, those unknowns friends would be certain to avenge him by talking.

"After all, a bargain is a bargain," stated Wiley, trying to appear magnanimous. "I think we better take them all with us."

"But we can't," I exploded. "I tell you this old tub can't stand the load!"

At the far end of the deck, Johann Drake had been slouched in a chair, his eyes closed against the sun. Up until the time I forgot myself and shouted, he apparently thought our conversation was merely concerned with routine preparations, because we had deliberately kept our voices down.

But from my tone, he guessed something was amiss. To my dismay, he got up painfully, came limping towards up.

"I beg your pardon," he said politely. "Do I understand something is wrong?"

Wiley drew a long wheezing breath. The black flashed his teeth in a smile, bobbed his head in an absurd curtsy of respect to Drake.

"Uh—we've got a transport problem," began Jim, his frown warning the native to keep his mouth shut. "These boys are exceptionally good porters, better than we could hire upriver, and we should keep them with us. But I find, to my surprise, that Dirk's boat can't carry them. I don't know what to do."

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Just the way he inflected that phrase, "to his surprise," shifted any blame to me, made it appear that I had misrepresented my boat's performance to him. But I was too worried that the black might blurt out about the rifles to show any irritation.

Drake put his arms behind his back, began to teeter back and forth on his thin legs, his head hunched down between his rounded shoulders.

Abruptly the teetering stopped. "Canoes!" he exclaimed. "That's the ticket. Hire some canoes and let the natives follow us."

He stared at us delightedly. "Right on the head, see!" he said cockily. "That's what reading does for you. It puts the old stuff in your head for when you need it."

I was certain the black didn't understand anything Drake said except the word "canoes," but his face lit with admiration at the swift way the skinny white man dealt with the problem.

WITHOUT another word, Drake turned and limped back to his chair. We made a trade with the villagers for the necessary craft. And Wiley made it plain to the black giant that he'd never see Nairobi again if he breathed a word about the guns to Drake.

"Me friend," the black assured us. "No talk anybody." But from his face you could tell he was surprised to learn that Drake wasn't in on the gun-running scheme.

That night at supper I brought out my picture of Saaru and told the cock-and-bull story about it apparently confirming rumors I'd heard for years about a white jungle goddess. I felt like a fool telling it, but, you know, he swallowed the story like a three-year-old hearing about the fairy princess.

All he could do was shake his head wonderingly and say, "Gosh! Now isn't that something? I ask you, isn't that something?"

He peered at the picture eagerly, not the least doubt in his face.

"We've just got to find this girl," he went on. "This is big time. This is the kind of thing you read about."

"Oh, we'll find her all right," Wiley assured him. "I've put lots of study in on this, and with Morris' knowledge of the natives and area, we can't miss."

Wiley let himself seem to finger his pistol unconsciously, while his expression grew serious.

"As I told you before, though, we're taking a real risk. These aren't tame natives. And for that matter, we don't know how the girl will receive us. She may be more bloodthirsty than the blacks."

He wanted to make Drake think we were earning our money. The thrill would be greater, too, for the skinny man if he thought the adventure was fraught with peril.

"Yeah?" Drake exclaimed excitedly. "Wouldn't it be something if we ended up in that girl's cooking pot? Think what the papers back home would say. This trip is going to be as exciting as any story I've read, I really believe."

With that, I went to bed. For my money, Drake should have been kept in a nursery. Tambi awakened me at dawn, so we could get an early start. To my surprise, I saw that Drake's bunk was empty.

"Small b'wana on deck," said Tambi, seeing my questioning look. "Him jump around this way, jump around that way. Make funny sound like run all day." And he illustrated with a series of gasping, strangling sounds.

It scared hell out of me. I leaped for my clothes. It sounded like Drake was having some kind of fit. I yelled to Wiley to get up and sprinted out of the cabin.

Sure enough, just as Tambi said, there was Drake writhing and kicking on the deck. A circle of wide-eyed natives surrounded him. As I burst through them, Drake suddenly bounded to his feet, began swinging his arms in wide circles. All he had on was an ill-fitting suit of underwear.

"Easy, old man, easy now!" I cried.

Drake abruptly let his arms fall to his side. He frowned at me.

"What's that?" he panted. "Nothin' wrong with me taking exercises, is there?"

Whatever I said couldn't have been very sensible. I was too astounded. The goof was actually doing gymnastics.

"Just getting in shape," he said, "getting the old blood stream cleaned up. A Drake doesn't like to be a drag on anybody."

I went off and sat down, telling Tambi

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to forget about breakfast and bring me a drink instead. Drake finished his exercises and went into the cabin to dress. The blacks were muttering, casting furtive glances in the direction Drake had disappeared.

When Tambi came back, he stood around, acting as though he wanted to ask a question. "Well, what is it?" I growled, after gulping the drink.

"The thin B'wana," he said in his native dialect, "it is talked that the gods have touched him with their favor. It is talked that he must be held in great awe in his own lands."

"If you mean, is he crazy," I said disgustedly in English, "he certainly is. He's the craziest white man I ever saw. In fact, I doubt if there's a crazier one in the world."

Tambi grunted, as though quite impressed. Touched with the favor of the gods, indeed, I thought. It was a fine thing when even the blacks began asking if a white man were nuts.

Then, as if I didn't have trouble enough, the coffee-colored giant came aboard to tell me that one of the canoes was in too bad a shape to use without repairing. I gave him a good sound cursing, telling him I wouldn't be delayed by a lot of grub-eating blacks. I didn't have any worries about those wage-hungry porters deserting us, so I told him we would leave the craft behind and it was up to the crew to manage to fix it and overtake us.

I could swear that my anger amused him. I promised myself that when the right time came I would see about fixing his wagon. He was entirely too smart to suit me.

THE trip went off as smoothly, as had the one before with Wiley, except that the whole time, it seemed to me, Johann Drake kept pacing around like a pirate captain, hands clasped behind his back, glaring out at the walls of jungle which reared up on either side of the river. Every new animal, every bush brought a spatter of questions from him. He was possessed with a breathless excitement. And morning and night, watched by the entranced blacks, for even Tambi was fascinated, he took his absurd version of setting up exercises.

Zita was waiting for us when we reached the Kongoni landing. He stood alone on the bank, a tall, gaunt, forbidding figure. I could feel it inside me that his presence there meant trouble.

The bearers following us in the canoes felt it, too. There wasn't a sound out of them as they nosed into the bank. And instead of immediately scrambling ashore, they stayed in the craft, their eyes fastened on Zita and the skull-tipped wand thrust in the ground before him.

I buckled on my revolver, had Wiley and Drake arm themselves with rifles as well as sidearms, and the three of us went to face the witchdoctor.

"You brought the guns?" Zita demanded, without any preliminaries.

"Would I be here, otherwise?" I returned, thankful Drake couldn't understand us.

Muscles jerked angrily in Zita's face. "You play with death, white man, when you speak so to me!"

Lying, I said, "You don't frighten me. My business is with Tyaika, not you."

"It is by Tyaika's order that I am here," he shrilled. "He commands that you turn the guns over to me. I am to bring them to him before darkness—without fail!"

"The day I leave, you get the guns!" I said firmly. "That was the bargain. And that's the way it's going to be."

Threats sprayed from him like water from a faucet, but I wouldn't budge. Neither he nor Tyaika was going to bluff me. Especially, when I knew that Tyaika's honor would keep him from harming a hair on my head as long as I kept my part of the bargain.

"I'll take them!" Zita finally raged, and whirling toward the jungle, he shrieked an order.

The dark fringe of jungle, so quiet in the hot, dead air one moment, became a sudden swirl of movement as along a hundred yard front Kongoni warriors burst into view. My heart stopped for a fraction. It would be child's play for them to murder us and take what they wanted. Maybe, after all, I'd misjudged how far I could count on Tyaika's indulgence.

But the dark rush of warriors halted when it came even with Zita. Beneath my shirt the hot wetness of sweat spread down my chest and back. Wiley was pale and the pulse in his throat leaped irregularly. Only Johann Drake seemed unaffected.

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He sidled closer to me. "What gives with these guys?" he asked, a faint frown on his thin, sunburned face. "They lookin' for trouble?" He wasn't perturbed. He was just interested.

Oh, you poor dumb joker, I thought, you've lived around the corner from the police station so long you can't even visualize getting hurt.

"Just a little show," I said soothingly. "The witchdoctor wants to impress us with his importance. I can handle everything."

"A witchdoctor, huh," he said, brightening. He scratched his nose and studied Zita. "I've read about those guys. You want to watch 'em! Pretty sharp!"

He took off his helmet, ran a hand through his bright red hair.

"Well, if it begins to get away from you," he offered, "give me the word. Though I haven't had much practical experience, maybe some of the things I've read about handling witchdoctors will help."

It was almost too much to bear. That skinny dude burned me up as badly as Zita. But Zita was yelling at me again so I had to give him my attention.

"Filth of a crocodile!" he shrilled. "You come to cheat our beloved chieftain! I hold back these war-dogs for one reason alone—because I know beforehand the trick you come to play.

"With the eyes of the spirits to aid me, I have no need to search your boat. I have been toying with you, white man. Think you that Zita would ask for guns that do not exist?"

A look of inexpressible evil came over his face. I suddenly realized his act was more for the benefit of the Kongoni than for me

"Come!" he cried. "I take you to Tyaika for judgment. You have gone too far this time!"

He was talking like a madman, but I was confident now that he wouldn't harm us. Powerful as he was, Zita didn't dare violate Tyaika's promise of protection.

"Your tongue is a leaf in the wind, waggling endlessly and without meaning," I said. "Let us hasten to Tyaika. I hunger to tell him what a fool his witchdoctor is."

He refused to allow any of our blacks to go with us. I left Tambi in charge, told him to have the porters make a camp on the bank. I reminded him to keep a watch for the canoe we had left behind at Azan. That canoe was beginning to worry me, because it had had plenty of time to overtake us.

Zita was pretty nasty the whole trip to Tyaika's kraal and his attitude was gradually taken up by the Kongoni warriors. We were hardly out of sight of the boat when they took our guns away and began hustling us along at a pace too fast for dignity.

Wiley was frightened stiff and kept cursing me for a blundering fool. I kept reassuring him that everything would be all right when we reached the chieftain.

"Once Tyaika gives his word," I said, "he never breaks it. We've brought the guns as we promised, so he'll do what he promised."

We were a badly ruffled trio when a squad of big Kongoni warriors finally shoved us into the council house to confront the old chieftain. He sat with his bad leg thrust stiffly out before him, his face sour with the pain which often came upon him from his old wounds. At such times, Tyaika was no man to trifle with. Seeing his condition, I felt certain he would visit swift justice upon Zita.

Before the witchdoctor said a word, I burst out with the whole story. Tyaika frowned, and his sunken eyes crept toward Zita.

"What of this tale, O Wizard?" he asked, and there was menace in the unnatural softness of his voice. "Can it be there is one in this land so rash that he would break a bargain made by Tyaika?"

Strangely, Zita had made no effort to interrupt me. He had let me tell my story in my own way.

"I have acted only out of love of Tyaika," he proclaimed, throwing his arms out dramatically. "It is these white men who have broken the bargain made with you. They bring no guns!"

He whirled, suddenly stabbed an accusing finger at me.

"And this dango—this fat, stupid dango—in trying to cheat and disgrace you has forfeited all claim to your protection. You are free of him at last! He, himself, has broken the chain of gratitude by which he held you."

As he told it, we had no intention of delivering any guns. The wizard charged

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that after making Tyaika fulfill his part of the pact, using one of his kraals and many of his subjects to fool Drake into thinking the girl was a white princess, we could collect the rest of the diamonds and get away without ever giving the Kongoni a single rifle.

I didn't like Tyaika's next comment, but still it showed he didn't have much faith in Zita.

"I've known this foreign riverman a long time," he declared slowly. "I don't think he'd have the courage to carry through so bold a trick."

"My courage had nothing to do with it," I said angrily. "I'm an honorable man and I keep my bargains."

Zita sneeringly asked, "Why is it then that you can't produce the guns?"

"I can!" I exploded. "I will, at the agreed time."

The gaunt wizard held his skull-tipped wand close against him, his long-fingered hands caressing its chalky whiteness.

"I say there are no guns!" he hissed.

I appealed to Tyaika: "This lying witchdoctor never set foot on my boat. The guns are there and I will be glad to show them to you privately. But surely you understand that I can't risk having the red-haired man or my porters learn that I'm supplying you with firearms."

The old chieftain leaned forward, shifting his shriveled left arm across his lap to ease it.

"What say you of the white man's offer?" he asked Zita.

"I say the time has come," he said loudly, "to make him a wager, my life against his, that he lies! Let us go to the boat and see!"

An excited murmur swept the council hut. Tyaika was obviously impressed. It would be a tremendous feat of juju if the witchdoctor, without ever having boarded my craft, could know what I did or did not carry.

For my part, I confess that a surge of vicious triumph burst over me. I'd hated Zita for years and now he gave me a perfect opportunity to settle my score with him. He was just unbalanced enough mentally to have fallen victim finally to his own mumbo-jumbo. He really believed that the spirits had told him I meant to cheat Tyaika.

"I accept the wager," I roared in a voice hardly recognizable as my own. Of course, I had no choice but to accept. Refusal would have been a confession of guilt. But I leaped at the chance to discredit Zita.

As Zita heard me, he began to smile and his glance slid around the room from face to face. Then, at last, he looked directly at me and burst into wild, high laughter.

And the cruel, gloating note in that laughter slashed through my belly like a white-hot knife. Gone was my feeling of triumph. Suddenly, I was afraid, terribly afraid that he had tricked me.

Both Wiley and Drake were pleading with me to tell them what was going on, but I pulled away from them, searching desperately for any trap the witchdoctor could have laid for me. But try as I might, I could visualize only one way that he could have arranged it for me to lose: that was to have his followers attack the boat while he was dragging us to Tyaika.

"Wait!" I cried as Tyaika got up to go. "While I've been here, Zita may have sent warriors to take the guns."

"Hai!" crowed Zita. "Watch the snake squirm for cover even though there is none!"

The chieftain gave me a queer, searching look. Up until then, I believe he really felt I had the guns.

"Certainly, those who serve you can answer that question," he said with terrible calm.

Nervously, I granted that was true. I had forgotten my crew and the bearers in my confusion. The blunder made me actually feel guilty.

ON THE trek back to the river, Tyaika was carried in a litter at the head of the column with his bodyguard massed closely about him. After him came a naked, sweating corps of drummers, next Zita and his assistants, then some three hundred Kongoni warriors.

Alone with six grumbling guards, Wiley, Drake and I were forced to bring up at the rear of the march. And even more humiliating was the fact that, of all those blacks, our guards alone walked gripping unsheathed swords. Tyaika was treating us like proved criminals.

"Guard of honor," I explained to Drake. "I invited the chief to look at our boat."

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He glanced doubtfully at the grim warriors keeping step with us.

"You looked pretty upset back there," he said thoughtfully. "I felt maybe you were in trouble."

I thought fast. "They—they were trying to keep us from looking for the white girl. It's the witchdoctor's doing. I'll bring the chief around, though, when I get him alone on the boat."

"Oh, is that all," he said with a relieved laugh. "I was about ready to believe they were going to chop our heads off?"

Tiger Jim slapped him on the back and gave what he intended to be a hearty laugh, but both the slap and the laugh were mighty weak. I'd whispered the truth of the matter to Wiley before the march began.

The whole trip I kept telling myself that nothing could be wrong, but when we reached the river and Tyaika called for me, my legs were trembling so, I could hardly walk up to him.

"You do not look well," he greeted me icily. "Perhaps, to save later talk, we should ask your bearers whether any of my people troubled them in your absence."

Without waiting for me to reply, he sent two of his bodyguards to bring forward any of the bearers who understood the Kongoni tongue. They returned with six men, one of them being the giant native who had blackmailed Wiley and me into bringing him into The Big Green. Tyaika singled him out as spokesman for the group.

"Was there any trouble here while your master was away?" he asked.

"Nay, lord," the deep-voiced bearer replied, looking puzzled.

"And nothing has been taken from the boat by anyone?"

"Nothing, lord," the big man said. "All is exactly as the white men left it."

He asked two more men essentially the same questions and received the same answers. A feeling of relief flowed over me as he turned and acidly asked if I were satisfied.

"Perfectly!" I said, beaming at the bearers. I turned and waved both hands at Wiley, crying, "It's all right!" He and Drake were being kept about twenty feet away by their guards.

The boat was tied up close against the bank. With the help of two warriors, Tyaika stiffly negotiated the slight incline of the gangplank. Eight members of his bodyguard followed. Then Zita arrogantly walked aboard.

"Here, you!" I told the huge bearer. "Come along and help!" Since he already knew about the guns, it would be better to use him than some black who would be surprised when I slit open several packs.

Hurrying jubilantly on the deck, I yelled for Tambi to bring a chair for the chieftain. But the big native with me was so anxious to please that he didn't wait for Tambi to obey. He raced across the deck himself, grabbed a chair and sped back with it. Before Tyaika could seat himself, I had thrown back the covering to the hold. I gave a gleeful chortle and jabbed a pointing finger toward the opening.

"There, you lizard-faced fraud!" I shrieked triumphantly at Zita. "Now who's a liar? Now let's hear the tune you are going to sing!"

The narrow cargo space between-decks was stacked with the gun packs. You could count them almost at a glance. And every single pack was there. I threw back my head and laughed until the tears ran down my cheeks.

How wonderful, how unbelievable to think that Zita had cut his own stinking throat for me. He was through—finished—a dead duck! And I hadn't raised a hand to bring it about.

Wheezing for breath, I finally pulled myself together. "Looks like you'll be needing a new witchdoctor, eh, Tyaika?" I suggested.

Tyaika blinked, startled by my actions. But Zita didn't turn a hair. He was completely unperturbed, studying me with a faintly amused arrogance.

"We have yet to see a gun, white man," he said sarcastically. "There are many things that can be wrapped in cloth, many things besides what your jackal-tongue says are there. Can it be you think us so stupid we will not ask to see inside the packs?"

That was the final straw. I had the big native throw out five packs and lay them smackdab in front of the witchdoctor. Then I told him to take his knife, slash them open from top to bottom, and dump the rifles on the deck.

I fastened my eyes on Zita's face. I

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wanted more than anything in the world to see his expression when the lightning struck.

I heard the canvas rip apart on the first pack, heard the solid sound of the rifles striking the planking as the black dumped them out. Then he was ripping open the second pack, rolling the guns on the deck. I can't adequately describe the feeling of exaltation that pounded through me.

And then I realized there hadn't been the least alteration in Zita's expression. He was looking down at the deck with the same hateful, condescending smile. If anything, he was more relaxed, more self-assured than before.

My gaze darted to Tyaika. He, too, stared fixedly at the deck. But there was a sudden harshness, a cruelty in his features. His mouth was a thin, bitter line.

And then swiftly I looked down myself. My heart froze in mid-leap. My throat squeezed shut and I couldn't breathe. The black was dumping out the contents of the last pack.

"No, no!" I screamed. "It can't be! It's a trick!"

Sprawled across the planking was a quantity of heavy sticks. The packs had been filled with carefully cut lengths of wood. There wasn't a gun on the deck. It was unbelievable, but it was true!

V

TYAIKA turned his head slightly, murmured to his guards. They sprang to encircle me, their long, cruel swords glinting as they moved. I tried to plead with them, but my mind wouldn't work, my throat wouldn't work. I knew them. I knew what they would do to a man.

It was horrible. I spun, trying instinctively to get away. One of them leaped in at me, the flat of his sword smashing down. The world exploded in my head, burst in one jolting, flaring crash of light.

I awakened out of sickening darkness. There was dreadful pain in my head and I was too weak to open my eyes. A great weight seemed to press on me and rough, lumpy objects jabbed into my body from every side.

It was Wiley's frightened, grating voice that finally stirred me to consciousness. He was swearing that he knew nothing of my plan to cheat the Kongoni, that I had tricked him as badly as them. Like a spider weaving a web, he threw out a net of lies and half truths to save himself.

He said he was an innocent, honest man whose only interest in coming to The Big Green was to search for the white girl. He said he wasn't to profit in any way from the diamonds paid for the guns. He was a good man who had only wanted to do a favor for the Kongoni and I had taken advantage of him.

Wiley had pressed the giant bearer into service as an interpreter. And hearing the bitter, vindictive way in which he sought to center all the wrath of the Kongoni on me, it came to me suddenly that some way, somehow, he had substituted the sticks for the guns.

Yes—that was it! He'd made the substitution when he picked up the packs. He'd hidden those rifles somewhere near Nairobi. With me out of the way, he could make again with Tyaika the same deal I had, and the whole amount of diamonds would be his alone. This time there'd be no payment deducted for the guns, no split with me and the girl. He'd do anything for money, and those diamonds represented big money.

Dazed and hurt as I was, hate gave me the strength to open my eyes and strain feebly up on my hands and knees. But there was a crushing weight on my back and the flooring beneath me slid and moved. I couldn't make it. Then I realized what was wrong.

I lay half-covered by a great pile of sticks. The Kongoni had leaped into the hold, slashed open every pack and had thrown the sticks over me. I gathered my strength, made another effort and succeeded in thrusting my head and shoulders clear of the wood.

"He lies, Tyaika," I gasped. "I didn't do it. They're all against me." I begged him not to listen, pleading with him to help me as I had once helped him.

Without even looking at me, the chieftain snapped savagely to his guards, "Silence him!"

Two blacks jerked me to my feet, while a third jammed the point of his sword against my stomach. "Speak again, dango," hissed the sword-wielder, "and this blade goes through you!"

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"There are too many words in this one's mouth, too," said Tyaika, indicating Wiley. "Away with him, and bring the flame-haired one that I may hear what cowardly pleadings he can devise."

"Ah, lord," said the huge interpreter, "you will find him different. It is a rare thing, but true, that he is one white man the gods have touched with their favor."

Tyaika frowned, obviously unbelieving. Then the interpreter amazed me by launching into a detailed recital of Johann Drake's habits. And as seen through a native's eyes, Drake's actions were certainly those of a crazy man.

His frenzied exercises taken at dawn and dusk, in the black's mind, were some queer, mystic rite saluting in turn the spirits of day and night. His insistence on trekking hour after hour at top speed, although the whole time he was on the brink of collapse, clearly was not the action of a normal person. His odd excitement and barrage of questions at the appearance of the most ordinary animal or bird, his queer, trance-like pacing of the deck, and his constant, unwavering courtesy to the lowliest bearer were cited as further examples of abnormality, the latter being especially so in the case of a white man.

I dazedly heard the interpreter relate how I had confided to my trusted servant, Tambi, that Drake was more "blessed by the gods" than any other man I had ever seen. Because I had been speaking privately and, according to the native, had shown an obvious dislike for the man and therefore wouldn't of my own accord compliment him, my words were accepted as true.

The significance of these remarks didn't dawn on me until Tyaika, finally looking impressed, said, "You've done me a valuable service. Had I not known these things, I might have sentenced the flame-haired one to death, as I mean to do these other two cheats. And to harm one of the *Ob-Karru* is a serious offense against the gods."

Then I understood: Drake was to go free! And why? That was the most bitterly ironic fact of all. Tyaika meant to free him not because he thought him innocent, but because he thought him crazy.

And to most tribesmen, a crazy person was a sacred object, a human especially beloved of the all-powerful gods. A native would no more harm one of the *Ob-Karru*, as they called them, than he would slay a blood-brother.

With sudden decision, Tyaika ordered Wiley and me taken away. Drake had been held on the bank while we two were being grilled. He'd been able to observe our treatment, but had been too far away to hear Wiley's lying attempt to place the blame on me.

But I was past worrying about Drake. My head was killing me and everything kept going dark. The instant the guards released me, I slumped to the ground, too sick and weak to support myself.

SOME time later I was roused by a native kicking me in the ribs. He threw a paper in my face and walked off. A hand snatched the paper away before I could grasp it. Almost immediately Wiley began to curse.

I sat up to find him reading a note. The Kongoni had made camp beside the river, and were busy breaking open stores they had found on the boat. We were being held at the eastern edge of the camp. It was almost sunset, and already the clamor of night-prowling beasts was beginning in the jungle.

As Wiley finished reading, he crumpled the note bitterly and threw it at me. Then without a word he threw himself face down on the ground. Hurriedly, I opened the paper. It was from Drake.

"Dear Friends," he wrote in a hurried, childish scrawl. *"Don't think when you see me leave in the canoe that I'm running out on you. After the wonderful, unselfish thing you've done for me, I'd never leave you in the lurch. You see, I've just learned how you saved my life by convincing the blacks I'm some sort of white magician or holy person. Whatever story you told, it worked. The chief is almost respectful.*

"By showing the chief the white girl's picture and making signs, I've gotten him to agree to send me to her camp. Since they regard her as a goddess, a word from her would set you free. If it's the last thing I ever do, I'm going to bring her back to save you boys.

"The chief won't let me see you, but he promised you would get this note. I can't

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make much sense out of the interpreter's talk, but apparently you are in no danger for four or five days. I wish, instead of trying to protect me from worry, you had told me the reason for the tribe's anger.

"The interpreter answers all my questions about why you're being held by saying, 'White men bring guns—No—Very bad.' I guess he means the natives didn't like us carrying firearms, but that doesn't seem reason enough to get them so worked up.

"Anyway, I know the white girl will stand by her own kind, so keep up your courage. I'm taking some trade goods, jewelry and cloth, to win her favor with.

Gratefully yours,

Johann Drake.

"P. S. The native, Tambi, apparently had a bad fall while we were at the kraal. He is still unconscious. I thought you'd want to know that I'd bandaged his head and made the big bearer promise to care for him."

AS I finished reading, I let the letter drop from my fingers. A commotion sounded down by the river. Looking toward the sound, I saw blacks carrying a canoe down the bank. As they floated it, Johann Drake suddenly appeared from the direction of my boat at a brisk trot. Looking like a flustered sparrow, he scrambled into the canoe.

The paddles dipped in swift unison, and turning upriver, the craft gathered speed. Drake twisted around and stared in our direction. I could see him waving. Then he was gone.

Nearby in the bush sounded a hyena's jerky, crazed laughter. As though a trigger inside me had been suddenly tripped, I began to laugh hysterically, uncontrollably. Wiley's head jerked up and hate flamed in his eyes.

"Don't worry, old pal, old Tiger Jim," I said. "You're gonna be saved! A white goddess is gonna save you! Your little friend Drake has gone to get her."

Tears ran down my cheeks. I beat the ground with my hands. I was sick inside, hideously sick, but I couldn't stop that awful laughing.

"Oh, Tiger, what a smart boy you are," I heard myself saying. "You'll have all the diamonds now. And all the guns. And a real, live white goddess to save your rotten life."

"Stop it!" he screamed. "Stop it, you dirty louse!" And he came at me like a wild animal, so fast that even our guards couldn't grab him.

He caught me by the throat. He was utterly berserk, his face contorted, queer, growling noises ripping from deep in his chest. I was too weak to throw him off. He would have killed me if the guards hadn't torn him away.

After that, they tied us hand and foot. Instead of building a thorn boma around the camp at sunset, the Kongoni spaced small fires in a half-circle out from the river to keep any night-prowling animals away. Besides the two men assigned to watch us, four more warriors were posted to guard the camp and tend the fires.

We lay at the outer edge of the camp, almost equi-distant between two fires. Near the river the Kongoni built a small thatch shelter for Tyaika. It appeared that the angry old chieftain wanted to keep us completely out of his sight.

But we could see Zita and him clearly, for a tremendous fire was lighted on the river side of the thatch hut and the Kongoni gathered about it in a circle to hear the witchdoctor boastfully tell of trapping Wiley and me. It was Zita's show, and his assistants spun and danced at proper intervals in his long-winded recital like a trained chorus, praising his powers and calling him the jungle's greatest wizard.

For a long time I watched, hearing him foretell a dreadful end for the "white dangoes," feeling my insides crawl as I thought of the many slow and awful ways the Kongoni had of killing a man. But utter exhaustion came to my rescue. Mercifully, I dropped off to sleep, the deep stupor of those who have been wrung dry both nervously and physically.

It was nearly dawn when I was roused by someone gently shaking me. "No speak, b'wana!" tensely whispered a deep voice. "This One come help."

It took me a moment to collect my wits, distinguished the figure flattened on the ground beside me. It was the coffee colored giant. How had he got there? Startled, I raised my head and looked around.

The camp was utterly still. The great fire

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had been kept high, and its shifting light rippled over clumps of sleeping warriors. The few guards leaned drowsily on their spears, staring into the blackness of the night.

But the two men watching Wiley and me, what of them? Not three yards away on my left I could see one of them sitting cross-legged on the ground, bent forward as though peering anxiously at the jungle. Then to the right, several yards past Wiley, was the faint silhouette of the other guard, also in a sitting position.

The giant was cutting the rawhide straps around my wrists. He must be insane, I told myself. The guards would kill us both. There wasn't a chance for us to get away with the two warriors sitting almost on top of us.

"No!" I protested fearfully. "Can't you see those guards? Great Scot, man, get away!"

He gave a low, humorless chuckle. "Not be fear," he soothed. "Those one much dead—plenty dead." And with the sinuous ease of a snake, he twisted on his belly and slashed the bonds off my ankles. "Wait!" he commanded.

Then he was wriggling over the ground to free Wiley. He moved so quickly and with such utter quiet that only by straining every sense did I keep from losing track of him. Within two minutes, he was back with Wiley. Both of us were bursting with questions as to how he had disposed of the guards and why he risked his own life to save us, but the important thing then was to get away.

He gave us brief instructions, and then inching on our bellies, we started toward the jungle. We moved very slowly in single file. With dawn close, the guards were no longer tending the small watch-fires so carefully.

With an animal's instinct for cover, the black utilized patches of grass, shallow rain gullies, small ridges of rock to keep us always in shadow. And by slow, nerve-wracking degrees we crept up to a point equi-distant between two of the dying fires, slid one at a time past that zone of greatest danger into the shielding darkness beyond.

But not until we had reached the utter blackness of the jungle itself would the native allow us to get off our stomachs or move at more than a snail's pace. It was the utter daring of the plan which made it succeed.

THE sentinels were posted against a possible threat from outside the camp. They had no reason to be watching for a rescue attempt from the midst of their own companions. And since two men were especially assigned to guard us, the sentinels devoted no special attention to supposedly helpless prisoners.

The giant told us how he had waited until the Kongoni slept before he began the long, difficult process of wriggling to where we were held. He had planned it carefully, cutting a length of hollow bamboo before sunset and fashioning several darts which he had smeared with a poison which all members of his tribe carried. Then he had snaked up behind our guards in the darkness and blown the darts into them. They were dead before they realized the sting they felt was more than an insect bite.

He whispered the whole story to us when we paused to catch our breath. His unexpected devotions touched me, for I knew that few blacks would dare the wrath of the Kongoni to help white men.

"This One be fear to talk out," he kept repeating, to explain why he hadn't tried to defend us before Tyaika. "Old chieftain much mad, kill black fellow if he goes to make talk."

Wiley and I both complimented him highly, promised to reward him for his faithfulness. "But what will we do now?" I said. "Any minute they may discover we're gone and they'll be after us." I knew we couldn't outrun the Kongoni on their own ground.

"B'wanas come," said the black. "This One steal gun from big white man canoe, hide 'um by river."

And he not only said he had stolen guns for us, but he also promised that once he had us safely placed on the river bank that he would steal one of the canoes. On the river we would have a long chance of reaching Azan before Tyaika's warriors could catch us.

The big native had the eyes of a cat. He led us sure-footedly through the tangle of jungle, circling out a safe distance from the camp and then bringing up back along until

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we were at the edge of the trees and within easy rock-throw of the sleeping Kongoni.

He felt around in the grass, came up with two rifles and belts of ammunition. He pressed them into our hands, told us to remain where we were until he could return with the canoe. Like a shadow he was gone, crawling toward the camp.

As quietly as I could, I checked the rifle, found it was unloaded. Wiley heard me, though, as I fumbled cartridges from the belt.

"We'd be fools not to stick together until we're clear of this," he said apprehensively. "If we start fighting, neither one of us will get out alive."

"That's right," I answered. "That's damn well right. But who could trust a sneak like you? You've already tried once to kill me."

He was breathing hard.

"You can trust me now," he rasped. "Our differences can wait. Is it a bargain?"

Naturally, I agreed. There would be time enough tomorrow to deal with Wiley. Tonight he was needed to man that canoe.

"Okay, shake on it," he said.

As though that handclasp would be a binding charm, he reached so eagerly for my hand that he inadvertently knocked from my fingers a cartridge which I hadn't had time to insert in the gun. I believe at that moment Wiley was really afraid of me, and there was a satisfaction in knowing it.

As he released my hand, I knelt down to search for the cartridge. We would have little enough ammunition if the Kongoni cornered us. I ran my fingers quickly over the damp, rough grass. To my surprise, I touched not only the cool, metal cylinder I searched for, but four empty shells lying beside it.

I picked up one of the shells. It still had a faint smell of powder.

"That's strange," Wiley commented, when I handed it to him. "White hunters never come here and you know no native hunter would burn up ammunition like that."

But we abruptly forgot the puzzle of the shells when an excited native voice screamed out in the camp that the prisoners had escaped. As one man, we spun to stare at the Kongoni. The canoe hadn't come and we were discovered.

"Oh, no—no—no!" Wiley moaned. "Where is that stupid black? We'll be finished in another minute."

Maybe my eyes were sharper than Wiley's. Even as he spoke, I knew we need never expect the bearer to return. I was too astonished, too confused, to say a word. I stood there dumbly, my mind frozen, watching the tall figure that raced toward Tyaika's shelter, crying in wild excitement that Wiley and I had got away.

The giant native was the man giving the alarm!

There could be no mistaking his voice. And as he halted in front of the chieftain's hut, every line of his powerful body was clearly limned in the light of the great fire. How could such a thing be? How could the very man who had risked his life to save us now suddenly scream for our capture?

VI

WILEY'S voice trailed off as he also identified our betrayer. He was staggered. He clutched tightly to my arm, as afraid I, too, would suddenly desert him.

The camp was swiftly in an uproar. Warriors leaped up, clutching their spears and shields, crying to one another as to the cause of the alarm. Then the grim old chieftain himself limped from his shelter into the bright light of the fire.

The giant native fell to his knees before Tyaika, and though I couldn't hear his voice, by his gestures it was plain he was talking rapidly.

"Don't just stand there," pleaded Wiley. "We've got to run for it, find a hiding place."

"But we can't buck the jungle at night," I told him. "It would be like ramming against a stone wall. You know what's in there, a tangled mass of creepers, brush and vines jamming every inch of space between the trees."

"There are bound to be trails," he argued. "If we can get far enough into the bush to be safe, we can find a trail when daylight comes."

"You don't know those black devils," I said. "Unless we can find some trick—a good trick—to throw them off, we won't live an hour after sunrise. No, we can't outrun 'em and we can't hide from 'em."

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What Wiley said next I'll never know, for just as he spoke there was the sudden hard, clear blast of a high-powered rifle to our right and very close. I was looking at Tyaika as the shot rang out. In the firelight the old chieftain stood out as clearly as an actor spotlighted in the middle of a stage.

As though caught and spun by a giant hand, Tyaika whirled twice around and went to his knees. The gun blasted again. You could see the black leader's body jolt and he was knocked over on his back. He lay not two feet from the fire, squirming very feebly.

The Kongoni warriors, who had kept a respectful distance while their chieftain listened to the excited bearer were struck dumb by the swiftness of the tragedy.

Before a single warrior could collect himself and go to his chieftain's aid, the gun hammered twice more, very fast, tearing the last spark of life out of the dying old man.

Mingled cries of fear, rage and sorrow broke from the circle of blacks. Abruptly the ring of men disintegrated. A few warriors, braver or more devoted than the others, raced toward Tyaika, but the majority sprinted away from the firelight.

Strangely enough, though the men who bent over the chieftain made perfect targets, the hidden marksman made no effort to hit the group. Apparently his only objective had been to kill Tyaika.

Even when Zita leaped into the firelight and began frenziedly calling upon the Kongoni to seek vengeance for the bloody deed, the rifleman didn't try any sort of gag to silence him.

Then with sudden horror I realized what the witchdoctor was saying: "Death! Death to the two white dangos!" he screamed. "This is their evil work." He pointed to the at the bearer who so illogically had betrayed us. "This Giant One saw them sneaking from the boat with guns and gave the alarm.

"They've made fools of us! Only blood can wipe out this disgrace! They killed their guards, stole guns from the boat and then skulked in the darkness, waiting their chance to kill our beloved leader."

A roar of hate went up from the Kongoni. Where they had been confused and disorganized a half-minute before, Zita's swift seizure of authority served to steady them, give direction to their raging emotions.

"Flush them from hiding, O War-Dogs," shrilled Zita. "What are two cowardly white men against our numbers? In this darkness they can't run far."

Waving his arms and leaping the witchdoctor ran straight in our direction.

"The gun spoke from there by the river," he raged. "Quickly, O Brave Ones, let your spears drink their blood."

LIKE stampeding wild beasts, the Kongoni were suddenly in motion, sprinting in a solid mass for the spot where Wiley and I stood. Forgotten were my arguments against braving the dark jungle. I turned and charged headlong into the bush.

There was no logic in my action. It was dictated by sheer animal panic. With my bare hands I tore my way through thorn and nettle, ripped openings in tangled walls of liana. I stumbled over shrubs, caught my feet on great roots, crashed into trees. If I couldn't batter may way through an obstacle, I crawled under or around it.

And Wiley, frightened that he would get lost from me, was clawing at my back every step I took. One second he was pleading with me to slow down and wait for him and the next instant he was hammering me with his fists, cursing me because I didn't go faster.

How long I kept going I don't know. It seemed an eternity, but in all probability it wasn't more than twenty or thirty minutes. My legs just gave way on me all at once, and when I fell, I couldn't get up. I lay there, sobbing for breath, my muscles jumping and trembling uncontrollably.

Vaguely, I heard Wiley threatening to leave me if I didn't get on my feet, but I was too spent to care. He started off once, but after threshing a few yards in that tangle, he lost his nerve and came back to try to get me up again. He was too much of a coward to go it alone.

When the pain in my lungs eased, I managed to sit up. I could tell by the loud chorusing of frogs that the river lay to our right. Behind us the sound of the Kongoni came nearer.

"We should have run toward the gunshots," whined Wiley. "I know that was a

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white man trying to help us. He's bound to have known a path that would lead us out of here or otherwise he couldn't have sneaked up on the camp."

"He was a great help," I said bitterly. "That bright little trick of killing Tyaika means that the Kongoni will get us if it costs the life of every man in the tribe."

"I don't care," snapped Wiley. "He was trying to help us and if you'd used your head you'd have gone to him."

"They'll find those four empty cartridges where we were standing," I remembered, "and be certain we did it."

He flinched, sucking in his breath, as a lion roared in sudden rage. From the direction of the sound, I judged that the Kongoni had disturbed the beast at his feeding. Maybe there would be a few less blacks to trail us.

"Why—why that might have been Drake doing the shooting," resumed Wiley. "He said he'd help us."

"Shut up!" I snarled. "It doesn't matter who he was. He's probably dead by now, just as we'd have been if we'd wasted time hunting him. Stop talking nonsense and let me think!"

As I got to my feet, I saw a spot of light blink on in the darkness and then disappear. It kept flickering on and off, seeming to grow steadily larger.

"What the devil is that?" I asked, gripping my rifle.

Wiley stared a moment. The light was very close now, dancing and bobbing.

"Why it's a flashlight," he said unbelievingly. "And the guy carrying it is really making knots through the brush."

He was close enough then for us to hear the rapid crunch of his footsteps. Only heavy leather shoes would make that sound on the jungle floor.

"That's the guy who did the shooting," said Wiley jubilantly. "It's Drake, I betcha! And you see, he's following a path, just like I told you. If you hadn't collapsed on me, we'd have found that path ourselves and been a mile away from here by now."

Although I was certain the runner was white and therefore a friend, I couldn't see Drake finding his way around the jungle like that. The way he held the light, you never had a chance to see anything of his person.

"Don't just stand there," cried Wiley, "and let him go by! Let's stop him."

He blundered into the brush, yelling at the top of his voice. My legs were too unsteady for me to keep up with him. The runner had approached within thirty yards by then, but the trail he followed was beginning to veer away from us.

When Wiley yelled, you could see the flashlight jerk as though the man were startled. Then abruptly the light went out and he stopped running. He stood in utter silence as Wiley kept floundering through the underbrush, pleading with him to help us.

A long, round column of light leaped out of the darkness in our direction. He was searching for us with the flash. The white glare touched nervously back and forth for a second before it found Wiley.

The light steadied on him. He raised his arms above his head, signaling to the unseen man, relief flooding into his voice. Then there was a crash of sound and a thin, quick thread of fire streaked out of the darkness beside the flashlight.

Wiley screamed, plunged sideways into the black-shining vegetation. The light darted away from the spot where he disappeared, slashed in search of me. I was throwing myself face down as the beam caught me.

The rifleman sent a quick shot trying to wing me as I went down. The slug fanned over my head and hammered into a tree. I crawled a few feet to the right and inched upward behind a shrub, my rifle held ready.

Instead of dousing his flash, the fool kept darting it about as though waiting for me to stick my head up. I promised myself I'd give him an unpleasant surprise, since it was evident he didn't know we were armed.

When the light flickered away from me for an instant, I leaned out from the bush, took deliberate aim at the point where I judged the gunman to be. By sheer force of will, I quieted my nerves, held that rifle steady. I didn't want to miss. I intended to blow a hole in him you could throw a rock through.

I held my breath and squeezed the trigger. There was a sharp, clear click—and nothing more! Of all the rounds of ammunition I'd shot in my life that one cartridge would turn out to be a dud.

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I cleared the chamber and slammed another shell into place. He heard the noise and the light started for me. Fighting against time, I aimed and once more squeezed the trigger with exquisite slowness.

There was the same impotent click of the hammer against a dud. I tried to throw a third shell into the chamber, but time had run out for me. The gunman's rifle blasted before I could fire.

Something slapped my cheek with searing hotness. I flung myself down and started rolling to get away from the bush. Slugs followed me, whining and richocheting above my head. He thought he had wounded me and was trying to nail me at the point where he calculated I'd fallen. But the thick undergrowth hid me.

The roar of the gun had silenced the jungle. Even the whirring of insects seemed to have stopped. When he quit shooting, I lay trembling on the ground. The beating of my heart sounded as loud as any sort of thunder.

Then in the quiet I heard him laugh softly to himself. He turned away still laughing and started on down the trail. When I heard his footsteps, I leaped up and leveled my rifle at his bobbing light. He was so confident he had disposed of us that he didn't even trouble to extinguish the flash.

Three times I tried to shoot him. The cartridges were all the same. They were duds. They were deliberate duds. That cursed black had known when he gave us the guns that we couldn't defend ourselves. It was all part of some horribly entangled plot that I couldn't even begin to understand.

VII

WHEN the man had disappeared, I called softly to Wiley. I figured he was dead, but to my surprise he answered me. I made my way to him. When he learned the gunman was gone, he began moaning and taking on, but feeling over him with my hands I found that he'd only got a flesh wound in the shoulder.

"Those shots gave us away," I told him. "The Kongoni will head straight for this spot."

"But bleeding like this, I can't travel," he wailed.

"You can stay here then," I said. After the beating I'd taken from the Kongoni, I had no sympathy for him.

He staggered to his feet, pleading with me at least to carry his gun.

"Throw it away like I did mine," I directed, explaining about the cartridges. When he refused, I took it away from him, showed him it wouldn't fire. Then I threw it down and led the way to the path.

When he realized we were folloging the rifleman, Wiley argued almost hysterically that we should turn around and go the other way.

"He'll waylay us," he said. "He'll kill us like sitting ducks."

I didn't waste breath answering. That fellow had to get away from the Kongoni the same as we did. Since he very evidently knew where he was going, the path must lead to safety. I didn't figure he'd spent any more time on us, but even if he did, it would be better to face him than the Kongoni.

We reeled along the path like drunken men, but difficult as it was to follow the windings of the trail in the darkness, it was infinitely easier than bulling through the undergrowth as we'd had to do before.

The increasing din of the frogs warned us of the river's nearness. For fear of blundering into the water, we went more cautiously. And then as we made a turn, I saw the flashlight blink on and off in front of us.

Though we couldn't see him, we knew the gunman was standing on the bank, signaling out across the water. We crouched down, wondering whether we dared make a rush at him in our condition. Before we could gather our nerve, the beam shot out across the murky river again, and into its light glided a long canoe.

The craft skimmed up to short. Then the light went out and I heard the man scrambling into the canoe. In another moment, there was the rhythmic splash of paddles digging the water, the grunt of straining natives. Then with a faintly discernible white wake the craft was gone upstream.

As though drawn by a magnet, Wiley and I went to the place where the canoe had touched shore. We stood there a long

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time without speaking. Upriver an elephant trumpeted.

I realized suddenly that I could make out the shape of the river, the bulky outline of trees on the other bank. I looked up and through the black roof of the jungle could see irregular gray patches of sky. The long-feared dawn had come.

"All right, smart guy, now whatta we do?" asked Wiley nastily. "Why don't you say something! You know everything, you always seem to think!"

I hit him with every bit of strength I could summon. I hit him squarely in the mouth. He tried to block the blow by throwing up his left arm, but it had stiffened from the wound and he was too slow.

He went stumbling backward into the river, fell and went under. He came up gasping and tried to regain his feet. I ran out into the river and standing waist-deep, hit him again.

I wanted to kill him. I wanted to beat his ugly face to a mushy pulp. All the frustrated rage and hate that had been accumulating in me for hours suddenly centered on him.

I kept following him out into deeper water, neither of us sane enough to realize the chance we were taking. Then abruptly the sticky mud was gone from beneath my feet. I went under, feeling the swifter current of the channel catch me up.

As I fought to the surface, Wiley was screaming, threshing wildly in an attempt to swim with his injured shoulder. He was trying to reach a heavy log floating two-thirds submerged near him. Then I saw the reason for his desperation. From the opposite shore, three long, gliding shapes knifed through the water toward him. Crocodiles had been attracted by our splashing.

The sight abruptly sobered me. In my rage, I'd forgotten that the river swarmed with those, cruel, long-nosed killers. And in driving Wiley into the river, I'd gotten so far from shore that the crocodiles could easily intercept me before I got back.

Utter paralysis held me for a second. Then terror threw me forward, sent me swimming toward the only haven in sight, the huge log floating near Wiley. I burst past him, wrenched myself onto the wet bark. He caught my leg with his good arm and I couldn't shake him loose. The crocodiles were almost on us and he was pulling me back into the water.

To save myself, I had to help him. I caught him with my right hand and boosted him up beside me, thankful for the water-logged branches which balanced the log, kept it from tipping over.

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The crocodiles veered off, disturbed by the rocking and splashing of the log as we scrambled for handholds. The current moved along with agonizing slowness while those long deadly shapes kept pace with us. One of the killers kept twisting closer, obviously trying to make up its brutish mind to attack. A single sweep of its armored tail could hammer us from the log.

Then for once in my life I was thankful for the weird, senseless twisting of the Azani river channel. The current nudged the huge log out of the center of the river, drifted it in a slow sweep toward the far bank.

When I saw how close to the bank we were going to come, I crouched, ready to leap. I hit the water flat and was against the shore in ten strokes. Wiley was cursing me as I pulled myself onto dry land.

He couldn't risk leaving the log. Hampered as he was, he would flounder so long in that deep water that the log would drift on past and leave him exposed to the crocodiles. Then as fear came into him, the flow of filthy language ceased and he pleaded with me to help him.

I was too spent to do more than raise my head and look at him. He wasn't recognizable as the blustering, boastful man who had set out from Azan with me a week before. That trembling, contemptible creature had plotted my downfall. When he substituted the wooden sticks for the real rifles, he had thought I alone would be held responsible.

The torment he was undergoing now was payment for his treachery. Although he was within a few yards of safety, he was slowly drifting away to his death. Already the crocodiles were growing bolder.

"Think about those guns you hid, Wiley," I called hoarsely. "Yeah, think about them when the crocs come at you. And think about where your greed got you."

His mouth, swollen and bloody where I'd hit him, dropped open when I spoke. His eyes fixed round and staring on me.

"Morris, I didn't take those guns," he quavered, and suddenly he was crying. "I swear to heaven I had nothing to do with it. I thought you took 'em." Great sobs wracked him. "They were in the packs when we put them on the boat at Azan. I can't figure out what happened, but please, please, don't kill me for something I didn't do."

For the first time it dawned on me that maybe Wiley was innocent. I had automatically accepted his guilt, and events had moved so fast that I'd never had a chance to reflect on the matter. And he said, I *was* killing him, killing him even more coldbloodedly than if I had used a knife.

The log had floated past me, moving parallel to the bank. Any moment it would begin to swing outward into the river. I thought I'd never make it, but I forced myself up and stumbled after Wiley. One dead branch trailed out from the main trunk to within a few inches of the shore.

I grabbed the branch and pulled. The current helped me by catching the far end of the log and turning it toward the center of the stream. The long trunk spun slowly until the near end jarred against the bank. Like a scrambling monkey, Wiley crawled toward me on all-fours and fell onto dry land. I sank down beside him, too weak to take another step.

It wasn't half an hour, though, before Kongoni voices across the river roused us. We wormed our way through a stand of reeds and into the underbrush. From that concealment, we watched fearfully, our hearts pounding as we wondered whether the angry blacks would discover us.

Four of the tribe's best trackers went inch by inch over the ground where we had entered the river. Listening to their reports to Zita, it was amazing to a white man the amount of information they could draw from a few marks on the ground.

They knew we had followed the strange white man to the river after a fight with him in the jungle, and they knew a canoe had briefly touched shore. But they couldn't string together the facts in the right sort of order.

They thought we had crept up and tried unsuccessfully to overpower the armed stranger. They surmised he had knocked us into the water and then had forced us out away from the bank at gunpoint.

"Longnoses quickly finish two bad ones," declared the oldest tracker. "Then stranger wait until friends come in canoe."

I could see Zita pull nervously at his chin as he studied the spoor himself.

"Truly, two such dangos would not face

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the riverbeasts of their own will," he said.

He looked out across the water as though to assure himself of our deaths. And, indeed, it did seem impossible that men could live more than a few seconds in the muddy river. At half a dozen points, the sluggish bulks of crocodiles were visible.

"But we must be sure," the wizard said. "You four will cross and search along the other shore."

A detail of warriors rapidly fashioned a raft from fallen trees dragged out of the jungle and bound together with length of liana. Using long poles, the crackers shoved the raft across the river. Since they figured a swimmer wouldn't waste any more time in the dangerous waters than was absolutely necessary, they searched only a limited area directly across from Zita, not suspecting that a hundred feet down the bank Wiley and I lay watching them.

Though the warriors seemed wholly convinced we were dead when the trailers reported back that there was no sign of us on the other bank, Zita's nervous, pacing manner showed he was not satisfied.

"What of the third white man?" a warrior asked him. "Should we not take canoes and search up and down the river for this intruder?"

"Bah!" squelched Zita. "He is of no importance, a mere, wandering hunter. By refusing to help the two escaped prisoners he made amends for trespassing on our land.

"No, we'll waste no time in useless pursuit of him. Rather, let us bear Tyaika back to his kraal and begin the required five days of mourning."

WHEN the Kongoni were gone, I suggested the best thing for us to do was head for the kraal where Johann Drake and the girl were. We weren't in any shape to attempt the long trek back to Azan overland, and without guns or food we couldn't hide out in the jungle. If we could contact either Saaru or Drake, they could provision a canoe and the four of us could slip down the river at night.

"We'd be putting our heads in a noose," protested Wiley. "That was bound to be Drake who tried to murder us. I think he's either gone completely off his bat or he's playing a game so shrewd we can't figure it out."

"Mebbe so," I granted. "But at least the girl will help us. And we've got to have help—fast!"

In broad daylight, I could get my bearings better. I remembered a trail paralleling the river. The kraal was roughly five miles away. It was dangerous following an open trail, but we wouldn't have lasted thirty minutes had we tried to buck the brush.

About noon we neared the village. It lay at the foot of a bluff about a rifle shot from the river. We left the path and climbed the bluff so we could look down on the kraal. We understood then why we hadn't seen a single native along the path.

A feast was in preparation. Women bustled around cooking fires, while the warriors, glistening with oil and adorned with bone and copper ornaments, gossiped and drank the bitter native beer under shade trees. News of Tyaika's death hadn't reached the villagers yet. Either Zita hadn't had time to reach the principal kraal and start the drums talking, or for reasons of his own, he was delaying the news.

From the bluff we had an unobstructed view of the proceedings. We saw Johann Drake come from the direction of the river. He looked fresh and clean as though he had just bathed. He carried his sun helmet in one hand, and his red hair was neatly combed. Stalking at his heels was one of our bearers who could speak enough English and Kongoni to serve as his translator.

"You see," snarled Wiley. "That's how he's worrying about us. I'll bet he'd shoot us down if we showed our faces."

"Make one sound," said a cold, deadly voice behind us, "and I saff him dot trouble. Now you tum slow und easy."

My blood running cold, I looked around into Adolf Geiser's cruel, puffy face. Held in fat, pink hands was a fine German rifle, a rifle fitted with a telescopic sight. And clipped to the huge belt which circled his bulging belly was a flashlight.

"Too bad," he said, "but I guess ve must all miss der show. Leedle Saaru can tell us lader vot happened und ve kann all haff gut laff about vot a dumkopft iss your Johann Drake."

He made us crawl away from the bluff and then get up and walk ahead of him

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down a game trail until we reached a small clearing. He wouldn't let us say a word. Two blacks waited there.

Geiser had the blacks tie our hands behind us. Then he eased his bulk down on a fallen log.

"I vound der stupid swine eggzactly ver you said," he told the bearers. "You did gut to see ver dey hid. Ve giff dem to die Kongoni, und be rid of dem vor shure dis time."

He took out a dirty handflerchief, wiped his sweat-beaded forehead and jowls.

"You—you followed us just because of the girl?" asked Wiley, his voice trembling. "You'd do this because I took her away from you?"

Geiser's bulging eyes regarded Wiley contemptuously. Then he studied me. Abruptly he threw back his head and laughed derisively.

"Two soch smart boys," he sneered. "Efen yet you can't figure it. Vell, if you live dumb, I let you die dumb."

"It isn't the girl," I told Wiley. "Geiser's the one I bought the guns from. He must have followed us to hijack the guns back."

Wiley was white-faced, his swollen lips trembling.

"Don't give us to the natives, Geiser," pleaded Wiley. "We don't care about the guns or the diamonds. Just let us go. We'll clear out and never say a word." He struggled to think of other inducements. "We'll even give you the money Drake paid us."

Talking to that huge, hog-fat figure was like addressing some monstrous beast which turned its head attentively at the inflections of your voice but which understood nothing you said.

With toad-like calm, he sat for more than an hour in front of us, never speaking once. Finally, one of the natives got up and walked across the clearing, listening intently.

"The woman is near," he said.

GEISER nodded. In another minute, Saaru appeared. She stopped, brows arching over her green eyes in surprise when she saw Wiley and me. She was breathtakingly beautiful, clad in the scanty costume she'd had on in the photograph.

She looked the part Wiley had hired her to play. She was a white goddess, pagan and wild and utterly desirable. Her body had tanned a soft, golden hue during her stay with the Kongoni and there was a new intensity, a new vigor about her.

"Saaru," called Wiley, "Geiser means to turn us over to the Kongoni. They're after us! Talk to him. Make him let us go."

With the lithe, undulating stride of a young lioness, she walked toward Geiser. She gave no sign she heard Wiley.

"Der show vent off all right?" the German asked.

"Yeah," she answered disinterestedly, "I came out, received the homage of my faithful people, wiggled around enough for that goggle-eyed little jerk to think I was doing a mystic dance, and then I retired so the feast could begin."

Geiser guffawed so hard his great belly swayed and shook. He reached out and patted Saaru's bare thigh approvingly.

"Dot's gut," he exclaimed, "und he still sweats bloot trying to have a private confab mit die vite prinzess. Ven he vakes up you are gone, ve be far away. Soch a laugh, he iss. I tink he nefer see der coast again."

"He's really a character," she chuckled. "My guards practically had to fight him off, he tried so hard to get in to tell me about these two cheap crooks being in trouble."

To Geiser's huge amusement, she told how she had played her role of a savage princess to the hilt, acting as though she understood no English, keeping Drake at a distance while she went through mock ceremonials, defeating every attempt he and his interpreter made to gain an audience with her.

"Vot a stupid peeg he iss," said Geiser, "to efen tink of dese two ven he iss seeing you. Himmel, iss vater runs in his veins, not bloot."

"Why, Adolf," she said in mock surprise, "I do believe you're paying me a compliment."

Wily was staring at her wide-eyed.

"You're working with Geiser!" he hoarsely accused. "You've been working with him from the first."

"Of course," she said. "Why should I be different from everybody else? All of your bearers work for him, and so does Zita. You're little game is penny-ante stuff compared to Geiser's."

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VIII

WHEN I heard what she said, I felt like someone had hit me in the stomach with a club. No wonder Wiley had been able to hire such brawny, willing bearers, with Geiser filling our safari with his own bully boys.

"Actually, you've been working for Adolf too, only you didn't know it," Saaru went on. "You transported his guns for him, took all the risk and paid him a fortune in diamonds to let you do it. He had worked out the gun deal with Zita weeks ago, but he couldn't carry it through because government agents were watching him on his end and on Zita's end he was faced with old Tyaika who wouldn't treat with any white man but Morris."

"But the Kongoni didn't get any guns," I screamed. "That's what the trouble's about. He hijacked them some way or other."

She smoothed a hand over her bare midriff, glancing at Geiser as though they shared a wonderful joke.

"Simpleton," she said to me, "can't you understand that Geiser had to discredit you with Tyaika and build up his friend Zita's prestige in the eyes of the Kongoni. As soon as you and Wiley got out of sight of the boat, your faithful bearers took the guns to a hiding place in the jungle and returned the packs which they had carefully stuffed with pieces of wood."

She broke off, suddenly tense as there was a crackle and break of brush at the far end of the clearing. A long-tusked boar broke into view, throwing his head up and stopping as he spotted us. He bristled, his red-streaked eyes glaring, and then just as Geiser snapped his rifle to his shoulder, the boar swerved into the undergrowth and was gone.

It took Saaru severel moments to relax. She seemed embarrassed to have Geiser see her upset by such a small incident. Almost anxiously, she picked up the thread of her conversation.

"Why, the Kongoni will look on Zita as the greatest wizard in their history," she pointed out, "especially so, when, in a few weeks, he announces that by magic alone he will produce guns for his people. After a feat like that, not even Tyaika will dare oppose his wishes. He'll run the tribe, and that's what both he and Geiser want."

"Tyaika's dead," I said. "Your boy friend killed him, shot him down from ambush like a dog and made it look like Wiley and I were the murderers."

She looked genuinely startled. "You did not tell me that was part of the plan," she accused, turning to face Geiser.

His fat lips twisted in a syrupy smile.

"Now, now, leedle one," he soothed, "you must not vorry about soch tings. Dis vay, Zita vill be chieftain und der droublesome old man is out of der way. Und besites, die Kongoni vill hate vite men efen more und I nefer need vorry anyvun finds out about der diamonds."

The frown slowly evaporated from her face.

"I guess you're right," she conceded. "If word ever got out about the diamond mines the Kongoni are working on the old French rubber combine's land grant, the investors who were left holding the bag when the combine went bankrupt would swiftly reestablish their claim to the land."

Mere mention of such a possibility brought a rumbling growl from Geiser.

"Ja!" he snapped. "Der blasted swine vould get it all. Dis vay, Zita und I share der benefits." He slapped the bulging expanse of his leg. "Ha! Und efervun laffed ven I take Kongoni voman vor wife. Dey say Geiser must buy black voman because no vite one vill stay vith him. Now who laughs? Dot woman iss Bita's sister!"

I understood everything, then. Zita's anti-white agitation had originated not in his own mind, but in Geiser's. The two had methodically cut all contact of the Kongoni with white men, except for me. It had taken special effort to handle me because of my hold on Tyaika. Tyaika's removed was also a delicate problem, but Geiser had masterminded it with deadly precision.

After maneuvering matters so that Tyaika condemned us to death, he had had the giant bearer, with Zita's approval and connivance; free us. Even while we thought we were crawling to safety, Getiser was waiting to murder the chieftain. Naturally, the Kongoni thought that in our desperation we had revenged ourself on Tyaika.

And it was easy to figure how Geiser had come upriver. He'd used the canoe which

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we'd left behind for supposed repairs. And after the guns had been removed from my boat, my crew had been too terrorized by the giant to come to my defense. Because Tambi was the most loyal of the crew, the big devil had slugged him unconscious.

"Iss time to go," said Geiser, glancing up at the sun. "Zita vill haff gotten all the varriors from der rifer by now. Ve take dese two to him and then be on our vay. He meets me at the riverboat at sundown."

The startled look came to the girl's face again.

"You told me you were going to see that they went free, once you'd turned the Kongoni against them," she declared. "They can't cause you any trouble. They can't go to the law because they were running guns, and they can't ever come back here. You said that yourself."

Geiser ponderously got to his feet. The rifle looked very small in his huge arms. He stood with his finger on the trigger.

"Vot I say und vot I do iss not alvays der same, my dear," he said with oily softness. "Vor instance, I promise you many tings vor helping me. Achtually, I'm going to giff you to Zita, also."

She started back a step, her eyes gone wide, her lips drained of color. The rifle barrel had steadied on her. The two blacks, rehearsed beforehand in what they were to do, had drifted a few yards behind her on either side.

"Adolf Geiser takes no chances," he said, his fat, cruel lips forming every syllable with precise care. "You do not tink I'd trust zo great a secret to a voman's tongue."

He motioned with his head to the natives and they closed in to tie her arms. As they seized her, Geiser relaxed, letting the gun barrel slip toward the ground.

Suddenly, I blinked and sat up stiffly. A man was easing out of the underbrush behind Geiser, moving with a maddening caution. The sun glinted on the heavy revolver he held.

It was Johann Drake. I lived a thousand agonies as I watched him maneuver. The sight of him lifted me out of utter hopelessness, and yet at the same time I was tortured by the awful knowledge that he was too stupid ever to succeed.

"Why didn't the idiot shoot? Didn't he realize he couldn't take Geiser and the two natives alive? I wanted to scream at the moron, tell him what to do, but I didn't dare breathe for fear of giving his presence away to the German.

"Drop the gun, Fatty! You're covered!" Drake suddenly spat in his quick, twangy voice.

When I heard what he said, I knew he'd thrown our last chance for life away. He was trying to act like the hero in one of those stupid stories he babbled so much about.

"Shoot! Shoot, you stupid fool!" I shouted.

But already Geiser had jerked his rifle up and was whirling. Drake just stood there, his shoulders hunched, his gun arm pressed in against his body. He was too dumb even to be excited. With millions in diamonds at stake, he seemed to expect Geiser to submit without a fight.

AND then to my amazement, just a fraction before Geiser could get in position to fire, Drake blazed away twice.

The German's elephantine hulk shuddered under the impact of two slugs which seemed to hit him simultaneously. He grunted, his rifle clattering to the ground. Then with a ridiculous, slow-motion effect, he staggered backward and plunked down on his huge haunches.

One of the natives had leaped away from the girl and sprinted straight for Drake, whipping his knife free as he ran. With an almost unearthly calm, the skinny, red-haired man tilted his pistol and shot the black between the eyes.

The other native streaked for the brush. With a seemingly careless wave of his arm, Drake blasted the man through the temple. Then he walked over to where the stunned Geramn sat and picked up the rifle. He stepped back a few steps, broke his pistol, blew through it and reloaded.

"Is he—hurt bad?" asked the girl, nodding toward Geiser.

"You mean, will he die?" said Drake crisply. "No, I was very careful. I only winged him. I want him to live to a very unpleasant old age working that blubber off on a prison rockpile."

"With all we've got on him," Saaru said, coming over to Drake and turning around

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for him to untie her wrists, "they'll throw the book at him."

"You did the real work, young lady," Drake said approvingly. "I merely got in on the final fireworks.

Saaru gave a nervous laugh.

"I was beginning to think you'd never get here," she said. "I'd about talked myself out, trying to make enough noise so they wouldn't hear you. Fatso was getting plenty tough."

The wonderful feeling of elation which had erupted in me when Geiser went down began to evaporate. Wiley and I looked one to the other of them in surprise.

"What's going on?" said Wiley in a weak tone. "What have you two got to do with sending anybody to prison?"

Johann Drake smiled thinly.

"That happens to be our job," he said. "We're government agents. Geiser's been causing trouble for a long time, smuggling guns, stirring up the natives, but he was always too smart for us until we got the idea of planting an attractive young lady in the Blue Fan."

Wiley's jaw hung loosely. "But—but you—"

Drake chuckled delightedly at our confusion.

"No, I'm not a simple-minded rich man," he laughed, "looking for a white jungle princess like it says in the storybooks. Knowing your sorry record," he told Wiley, "we knew you'd go hook, line and sinker for my story in your eagerness to cheat a dope of his money.

"I wanted to get in to the Kongoni area without arousing suspicion, and you made a perfect advance man for me, babbling about your rich, half-witted client from the United States. Geiser never gave me a second thought. We didn't realize at first that you two would get mixed up in the guns. My job was to find out what was troubling the Kongoni, why they wanted firearms. Fortunately, everything worked out more quickly than we anticipated."

Wiley collapsed like a pricked balloon, slumping down without saying a word. I did something even sillier. When Drake gave a detailed recital of what he thought of us, I blubbered like a baby. It was pretty grim to realize that instead of being the smart guys, Wiley and I were the real jerks in the deal.

When Geiser could walk, Drake and the girl herded us down to the river where they had a canoe hidden. As we pulled away from the bank, we heard in the far distance the great Kongoli signal drum as it began telling the jungle of Tyaika's death.

Drake made Wiley and me help him paddle to the camp where Tyaika had been slain. The place was deserted, except for my boat and my frightened crew members. Tambi had a bloody bandage around his head, where the giant had hit him. The bearers had gone with Zita to the Kongoni kraal.

Drake made me check the motor, get it ready to gun. Then he took Geiser down into my cabin, and they stayed down there about twenty minutes. When they came up, Geiser's shoulder wounds had been neatly bandaged, but he had some red, swollen places on his face I hadn't seen before.

"Geiser has offered to show us where the guns are hidden," Drake announced suavely and with him nudging the German along, we walked about a half-mile down the river to a low bluff. The rifles were neatly stacked in a cave in the bluff.

He loaded us all up, black and white alike, with guns, made us carry them to the boat. It took four trips to get them all back, and exhausted as we were, Drake made us work like demons.

As sunset approached, he and Saaru locked everyone but Geiser in the cabin. They waited on deck for Zita. The witch-doctor walked across the clearing and up the gangplank for his meeting with the German. The giant bearer, who had arranged the whole thing, was with him.

I found out later that Drake and Saaru were sitting out of sight on the deck with drawn guns. They had Geiser gagged and tied in a chair on the bridge as a decoy. The giant gave up without a fight, but Drake had to shoot Zita's legs out from under him.

Drake called Tambi and me up on deck then, and dangerous as it was to run on the river at night, he made us take the boat about three miles downstream and anchor on the far bank. No pursuit developed, however, because Zita had slipped away from the kraal secretly.

We started for Azan at dawn the next day and made the run in three days instead of

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the usual four. As Drake said, it didn't matter too much whether I tore the old scow apart or not, because I wouldn't be needing it again for a long time.

The government quickly straightened out the Kongoni by taking Zita back under military guard to make a public confession before the tribe. And even before we were sentenced, the stockholders of the old French combine were pouring men and machinery into the jungle to work the fabulous mines the Kongoni had stumbled upon.

Wiley and I got ten years each. Geiser, Zita, and the giant bearer got life at hard labor.

But that blasted redhead, Johann Drake, got Saaru. I read about their marriage in one of those blood and thunder pictorial sections of the Sunday press two months after I was sentenced.

It made quite an exciting story, the romance of two government agents who fell in love while on a dangerous assignment against Congo gun runners.

HASHKNIFE and Sleepy had often turned up as representatives of the powerful Cattlemen's Association, but usually they could spot the men who had asked for their help. *This time no one would own to having done so.*

The thing to do was to leave that hectic part of the country, *pronto*. Did they? Of course not—Hashknife smelled mystery, and that was enough.

"Mr. Smith of the Ten Bar B"

A ***Hashknife*** *novelette*

by

W. C. TUTTLE

In the next issue of SHORT STORIES

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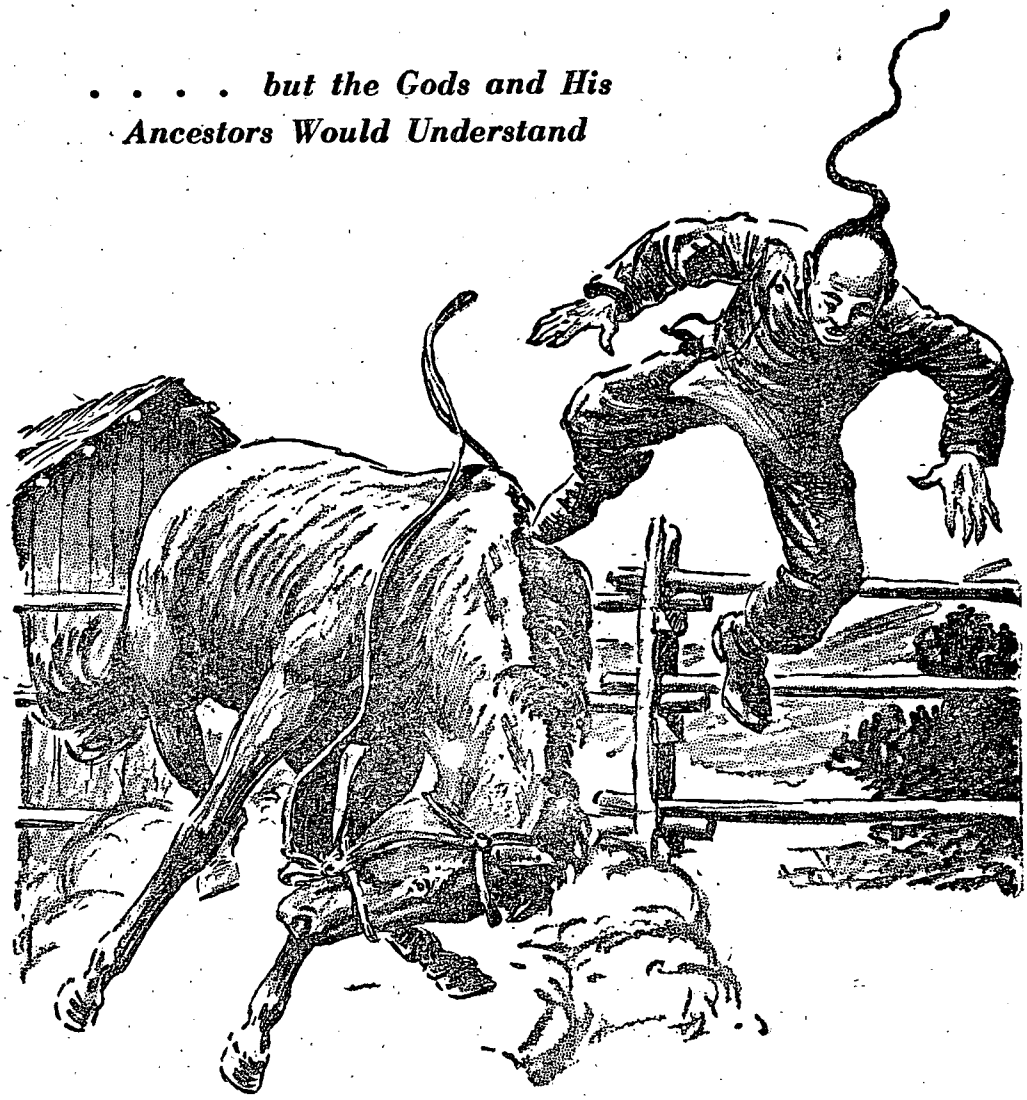
. . . . *but the Gods and His Ancestors Would Understand*



THE FRUSTRATIONS OF WANG SOO

By WILBUR S. PEACOCK

WANG SOO contemplated the future. It lay ahead, a dour thing of little promise; and that was strange, for within the week his bride would arrive on the stage coach from San Francisco.

He sighed and drove the iron across the Mayor's shirt. Damp cloth sizzled, and he racked the iron, letting the metal cool. At the moment, dejection was his lot; he cared for nothing.

He was a frustrated man. Life had caught up with him and edged on past. And when he gazed at the sun-soaked streets of Raw-

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hide, Wang Soo felt strangely alone and defeated.

He was a frustrated man. Life had caught were none of his people, no temples, no fan-tan houses. Here was only a rolling land, Rawhide squatting tiredly in its middle. Cattle drives came through here on the way to market, weary riders raising hell at the saloons until time to push on again. This was Rawhide, the place he had thought to become an American and rise to eminence on frugality and ability. And now he was only the "China Boy" who was the butt of town jokes, a long-queued shuffling Chinese who worked long hours in his laundry shop.

That, too, was galling, for he had been a *boohow doy* of the Hip See Tong. He had earned a name and respect with his consummate skill in the use of hatchet and knife. He had been a man to fear and envy.

But now, because he thought to be a part of this new country in all ways, those tricks of the past were laid aside. He wondered, now, if perhaps he hadn't made an error in his plans.

He rolled a cigarette, failing as usual to accomplish it with one hand, and leaned against the door's edge. Wistfully he stared at the posse riding down the street in its new search for Will Turkin and his gang. Rude laughter had greeted his offer to ride along.

"Get back to your laundry, China boy," Sheriff Benson had advised; and he had walked away, forgetting the bow-legged swagger he had practiced secretly in the seclusion of his laundry yard.

Hurt had lain in him, but his face had not lost its smile. He had listened to the jibes and then returned to the laundry. For the moment he had forgotten his one ride on the back of a horse. Now, remembering, he was a bit envious of the lean hard men and their reckless dash as they straddled their horses. Such was not for him, and the knowledge was a further blow to his pride.

Wang Soo sighed dolefully and wondered what Mei Mei would say when she discovered he had lied in his letters. Not, he reasoned, that he had really lied. It was only that he was so proud of Rawhide and its affairs. Still she might have misunderstood. And when she arrived and found he neither rode horses nor received respect from those of the town, she might be hurt.

She would not truly understand, for on Mott Street men had bowed in passing, and his name had been high in praise when the Elders met. He had been a man of some consequence in 'Frisco; and now she would think him a nothing, a nobody.

He blew pale smoke into the sunlight and watched the posse vanish. A dog padded wearily through the dust cloud. Almost, in his imagination, could he see himself with the posse when Turkin's gang was found.

"Hup!" he would say. "Leach fol the moon. This is Wang Soo, *homble,* blinging you back to justice."

That was, of course, in his imagination.

In truth, he would finish the Mayor's shirts and then wash and iron Missus Grady's laundry. Lino Trujillo had brought it an hour before, his ancient Mexican face failing to return Wang Soo's smile.

Wang Soo shrugged, then flipped the cigarette away. He turned to the iron, testing it with his finger. It was too cold now, and he swore in petulant Cantonese. Trouble, trouble trouble! It was enough to try the patience of Kwan Yin.

He drew another iron from the stove top, then placed it aside to cool. Inadvertently, his head brushed a clothesline, and his cap came free. A pin slipped, and his queue fell, tip brushing the floor in coils. He lifted it gently, wiping it before recoiling and pinning it into place again. Thirty years now had it remained uncut, and it was fully long enough to touch the floor and reach upward again to his waist. It was braided in the five strands of custom, and it gleamed oilily-black in his steam-marked fingers as he pinned it in a neat bun on his head.

The iron was at the right heat now, and he smoothed the last of the Mayor's shirts. He worked absently, Mei Mei's piquant image floating in his mind. He smiled blankly at the wall, still as smitten as he had been the day he first met her in Yat Sing's home.

HER price had been great, of course, but he had not counted the cost. She was small-boned and slim, and her teeth sparkled like the whitest of china when she

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laughed. She had been maidenly, too, not forward like some.

He had spoken to her but once, as custom demanded, but she had said she wanted him, and he had promised to send for her. Now she was to arrive, her slave-debt paid, plus a bit for Yat Sing's profit. Here she would be a help, as well as a wife, and—he chuckled in masculine embarrassment at the thought—perhaps bear him sons to carry his family name into the future.

"Aaiiee!" he said to himself. "It is a fine thing."

But even so, he wondered what she would say when she found he was no longer a man of stature. Her love would remain, of course, but in her mind he would never loom so large again.

Sighing, he opened Missus Grady's bundle, plucking the note from the top of the clothing and turning it over in his fingers. It was in English, and that he could not read. But he had received notes before, and the barber was always willing to translate for him.

He slipped bare feet into crimson-soled slippers, and left the laundry, padding along the board walk to the barber shop. Despite himself, happiness lay in his heart, and he hummed a faint melody in time to his steps.

Keever, the barber, glanced up from stropping a razor, then grinned in superior friendliness.

"'Morning, Wang Soo," he said. "I hear tell you tried to ride with the posse." His grin broadened. "Only way you ever ride is to glue yourself on."

Wang Soo smiled unabashedly. "Some day I lide holse, you see," he said hopefully, extending the note. "Please to tell what glacious lady say."

Keever smoothed back too-slick hair, studying the note. "It says," he declared, "'Please do this laundry as soon as possible and return. I cannot do it myself, for I've hurt my shoulder in exactly the same way as I did last time.'"

"Thank you," Wang Soo said formally.

He bowed ceremoniously and retrieved the note. He padded from the shop, ignoring the last jest of the barber. Sometimes, and especially when Keever said them, jokes wore thin on repeated hearings.

He felt a sense of sympathy for Missus Grady. Even at her age, she was usually self-sufficient. She lived alone, except for Lino Trujillo, her Mexican hand, who was almost as old as she. Her husband had been murdered by rustlers a few months before, and she had fought at his side as she had fought Indians years before.

Wang Soo clucked his tongue. This was 1861, but even so, women could not be so modern as to think themselves completely self-sufficient.

He stretched his arms looseningly, glad his shoulder was not injured. Long hours over a tub had swelled the muscles of his back and arms, and he knew how helpless she must be feeling. The last time she had been crippled had been when she used a Sharps rifle to fight the rustlers. The huge gun had almost broken her shoulder. And now, as her note said, she was injured the same—

"Aaiiee!" Wang Soo said in sudden wonder.

He blinked at a hitched horse, and the bay blubbered its lips in disdain. But he gave no heed.

"The *same* way!" he whispered.

A Sharps rifle?

Rustlers?

Trouble?

Will Turkin!

Now Wang Soo was an intelligent man. Daily he bent over his tubs, perspiration runneling from his body. But at night, he read from the classics, for he was ambitious. As a *boohow doy* for the Hip Sees, his mind had worked as competently as his blades. And now, with the slightest of clues clutched in his fingers, he revolved thoughts and ideas, and found an answer.

It was a logical answer. Turkin and his gang were penned up in the country. They had bungled the bank robbery, killing two men, and a posse had been on their trail within minutes after they took flight.

To the North lay the badlands, and only fools would try to penetrate their canyoned depths. The stage coach had carried the robbery news to the West, and posses had ridden for the East and South.

But Turkin must have turned like a shot-stung lobo, doubling back; and, if Wang Soo's deductions were correct, he and his gang were using Missus Grady's Lazy S spread for a hideout.

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Wang Soo paced deliberately to his laundry and perched on the edge of the ironing table. He rolled and lit a cigarette and smoked thoughtfully. His first impulse had been to spread his suspicions. But remembering the rude laughter he brought to almost everybody, he nursed his pride and thought of other ways. The logical man to notify would be the sheriff, but the man was riding with his posse along the edge of the badlands.

A thought intruded, and Wang Soo scanned it closely. Here, indeed, was a moment for which he had waited overlong. If Turkin was hiding at the Lazy S, then he might be able to capture him and thus build a reputation before Mei Mei arrived.

He smiled grimly at the thought, feeling no fear, his finger tracing a white cicatrice along his right arm where a tong knife had slit in passing. He had met men like Turkin before.

The table creaked as he slid to the floor. He poured steaming water into a tub and mixed in strong yellow soap. He washed clothes quickly, foamy suds rising to his elbow. Within an hour, Missus Grady's laundry was ironed and he was making final preparations.

He hid his old tong knife, hatchet and revolver in the bundle and then wrapped everything in a battered sheet he used when making deliveries. He lit a stick of incense before the statue of Kwan Yin in his sleeping room, thumbing his chin respectfully and calling upon several ancient gods for guidance and aid.

Then he slipped into his kimono coat of red-dyed cotton, changing his slippers for stout shoes of leather. Shouldering the bundle of clothing, he pulled the door of the laundry to, and strode along the dusty street.

"Better ride; the walking's hot!" Keever called mockingly from his shop, and Wang Soo forced a smile and then walked on.

HE WENT swiftly, almost at a run, for in him lay sturdy strength which never waned. The miles fell behind, and he wished again he could ride as others did. Cowboys had it easy, he thought, for their mounts did all the work.

Far away, the mountains were low-flung clouds on the horizon, and Wang Soo remembered his one visit there. The air had been cool and tangy of pine. Some day, he and Mei Mei would visit there for a time, he thought.

He came to the top of a low hill and took the road to the left. A weathered sign bore the Lazy S mark, branded into the wood, and caution entered his mind.

If he were right, Turkin and his gang hiding here, he was walking straight into a dragon's den. He would be one man among four, and those were odds which would give trouble to anyone. But because he had cast the dice of his fortune, he must follow the roll, and so he went on. He felt the slight beating of a vein at his throat, and suddenly the mildness was gone from his round features, leaving them hard and flat-planed.

He saw the house and outbuildings and did not slow his even pace, a bland smile suddenly about his mouth. He followed the corral fence, seeing the shadows of horses in the chinkpole stable. Elation touched him, for there was no need for Missus Grady to have so many now.

He saw a curtain move at the house window, and artfully, his shoulders rounded and he was suddenly smaller than his real size. He shuffled along the side of the house and tapped on the rear door. Echoes ran through the rooms. A windmill creaked tinnily.

He knocked again, and when the door finally swung open, he smiled blandly and inoffensively.

"Laundly fol Missus Glady," he announced to the bearded man.

"I'll take it," the man said.

"No!" Wang Soo drew back. "One dollal owed Wang Soo. No gyp this time. I see Missus Glady and collect."

"I said I'd take it, China boy!"

He was a big man, bushy-faced and suspicious. His hand was twice the size of Wang Soo's and three times as dirty.

"Who you?" Wang Soo asked patiently.

"The new foreman," Bushy-face answered. "Gimme the laundry."

"I see Missus Glady."

Wang Soo was an irresistible force. Unless Bushy-face wanted trouble, he would have to give in.

Bushy-face wanted trouble.

His free hand came into sight, and a gun

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was in it. Wang Soo swallowed. The muzzle gaped like a tunnel in his face.

"Aaiiee!" he wailed softly.

"Get in here," Bushy-face ordered.

Wang Soo followed orders. He sidled past the gunman and across the kitchen. He stepped into the living room, and men stared with hard eyes. Missus Grady sat in a chair, a mustached man at her side.

"How do," Wang Soo said ceremoniously.

"Oh, Wang, and I counted on you!" Missus Grady said in lost hope.

"I told you, Will, that note meant something!" Bushy-face said.

Wang Soo was backing, step by slow step, as though frightened.

"Search him," Will Turkin snapped.

Wang Soo found the knife. His fingers caught the tip aand drew it in a fleeting movement. He flipped the knife in a vicious tongman's cast, and when it struck, Bushy-face cried out, gun dropping from his skewered hand.

Then Wang Soo had his revolver free, and he was again a *boohow doy* of the Hip Sees.

"Leach fol the moon, *hombles,*" he said.

A rocket exploded in his head. It burst in violet flame, and he was falling forward, blasted from his feet. He fell slackly, pawing at the floor, and then all sensation died away.

He awoke ages later, spluttering through water which drenched his head. Pain was a bell clapper in his skull, bouncing from side to side. He was sitting, back against the wall, so weak he almost toppled.

"Wall right, China boy," Turkin said thinly. "Who else knows we're here?"

Wang Soo fought clearness into his mind. He shook his head, staring at the outlaw. Coldness came to him when he saw the man's eyes. He'd seen such eyes before. They held no expression and no life. They were dirty ice, and in them lay no semblance of mercy.

"Who—" Turkin began again.

"Hundleds, thousands!" Wang Soo spat his answer. "Lanch all sullounded. You sullendel quick, you no get killed."

Will Turkin straightened, balling one fist into the other palm. His gaze swung to where Bushy-face was having his wrist bound with a dirty handkerchief. Bushy-face swore monotonously, his eyes hating Wang Soo.

"I warned you," Missus Grady said acidly. "You better run for it while you still can."

Wang Soo was very proud of her. She was tiny and white-haired, utterly impotent in the midst of the sweaty dirty robbers, but her chin was stubborn and brave.

"Shut up!" Turkin snapped. "You've been too smart all along."

"Don't think everybody's as ignorant as you."

"Shut up, I said," Turkin snarled, and he slashed his open palm across the old woman's face.

Wang Soo didn't move. He saw the slow tears of anger and humiliation well in Missus Grady's eyes, yet he made no move. He had played his part like a child, and now he must wait until the dice of his fortune rolled again.

"Kratt, you stay here and watch," Will Turkin said in sudden decision. "Me and the boys will take a looksee." He grinned at the woman. "I think China boy is lying, but even if he isn't, nobody'll shoot as long as we hold you."

"You dirty coward!" Missus Grady said defiantly.

"Watch 'em, Kratt," Turkin said shortly, and turned away.

Bushy-face nodded and lifted his revolver. Blood stained the kerchief on his wrist, but he handled the gun with easy familiarity in his left hand.

"I hope they give me trouble," he said heavily.

The three outlaws left, stringing through the kitchen door. Their eyes stared blankly at Wang Soo, and all their eyes were the same, incurious, unhuman, like those of men who saw death reaching and knew they could not win.

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Then they were gone, and seconds later, the drumming of hooves sounded and died away.

"I'm sorry, Wang Soo," Missus Grady said. "I thought you might figure out the note and bring help."

"I undelstand the note," Wang Soo admitted ruefully. "But posse gone, and I aflaid people laugh at me when I say I know Tulkin gang on lanch. I come alone."

"Good!" Kratt stood. "That's what I wanted to hear." He scowled. "Now get up."

Missus Grady's face went white. "You wouldn't dare shoot him in cold blood!"

"You get up, too," Kratt ordered. "I don't figure on watching you both in here, so get in the kitchen. You'll be better off in the pantry."

Wang Soo came slowly to his feet. His head ached, and his clothing soaked with water. Yet there was dignity in him as he went forward and aided the old woman from the chair. Anger burned in his eyes when he saw the bruises on her thin arms and face.

"Speed it up," Kratt said nastily.

They moved before the menace of the gun. The pantry was at their right, its door pierced by a foot-square glassless window. Missus Grady entered, followed by Wang Soo, and then the door was shut.

Kratt grinned through the opening. "Be smart and you won't get hurt."

He pulled a chair before the door, tilting back on its rear legs. He flexed the muscles of his right hand, wincing at the pain in his wrist.

"You're lucky I don't blow a hole in your belly," he said to Wang Soo.

The little Chinese said nothing, turning to study the closet. Jars were stacked neatly on the shelves. He prowled the small space, searching for anything which might be used for a weapon.

There was nothing with which to face the gun in Kratt's hand. He thought of breaking jars and using splinters of glass as knives, but knew the outlaw would react too promptly for the plan to work. At last he spread his hands philosophically.

"No can do," he said.

"I know," Missus Grady said wearily. "I know."

THE minutes dragged. Wang Soo swore at his stupidity in letting an outside guard sneak into the house and pistol-whip him unconscious. His brain ached, and his exploring fingers found a double bruise of sore flesh on his scalp.

His queue was soaked, of course, and he unpinned it and let it fall, stripping water with tightened fingers. Missus Grady watched, and despite the moment, he displayed the queue in silent pride.

He used his kimono coat to dry the supple length of hair. He touched the five strand braid reverently. With this he expected to be yanked into Heaven when he died. Too, all Chinese wore queues in memory of the Empress.

He coiled it slowly, winding it about his hand. It was almost like the hair ropes some cowboys wove in spare time from horse hair, except that it was more supple and shone with life. It was much like the ropes which would hang the Turkin gang some day.

Wang Soo paused, held in thrall by a single fleeting thought. He nurtured it, letting it grow, and his eyes narrowed in concentration. He stared blankly at the old woman for a moment, then peered through the door opening. Kratt, certain of his dominance, was completely inattentive.

A smile came to Wang Soo's mouth. Swiftly, he fashioned a running noose in the end of his queue, knotting it securely, then sliding the loop open. He held the queer rope up, admiring it, and winked at Missus Grady.

It was long enough, he judged, and he turned back to the door. Missus Grady was silent, the sheen of incredulous admiration in her eyes.

Wang Soo edged to the small window,

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amused, despite the seriousness of the moment, at what he planned to do. He was now a cowboy, without a horse, without a cow, and in possession of the strangest lariat any cowpoke had ever used.

He flipped the noose. His head was close to the window, and the position was awkward. His hand and wrist were barely through the hole, and the queue-rope dangled in a long loop. Only one try would he have.

Kratt caught the movement. His head jerked up, and the noose settled perfectly. Amazement lay in his eyes, and he was reaching for his gun.

Wang Soo leaned back, and pain slashed at his scalp. Then his hands were pressed against the door, and he was braced, yanking Kratt from his chair and drawing him toward the door. The gun clattered to the floor. Kratt squawked, and then his face was at the window, purpling, his hands clawing at the sinuous living rope.

He could gain no purchase, his balance was gone. He strangled slowly, eyes bulging with horror. Missus Grady watched in dreadful fascination, but Wang Soo could not see, for his head was tilted forward, his eyes closed with strain.

Seconds passed, slow dreadful moments in which the scrabbling of Kratt's boots came weaker and weaker. Finally all sound ceased.

Wang Soo went forward, Kratt's weight dragging him to the door. Pain was in his scalp, and his breath was a series of whistling gasps in his throat. He pushed against the door, and Missus Grady slipped through. Tension eased abruptly, and then his queue was free, unknotted by skillful fingers. Kratt fell to the floor.

Wang Soo stepped from the pantry, thumbing his chin respectfully to the memory of Kwan Yin, and then rubbing his tender scalp. Now had the dice rolled true and fair, and this was the moment for which he had waited.

"We run now," he said.

Missus Grady shook her white head. "I can't, Wang Soo," she said. "They turned the buggy horses loose, and I can't ride in a saddle."

"But—" Wang Soo began helplessly.

"You go for help. Find the sheriff and bring him here. I'll use Kratt's guns for protection until you return. Only hurry."

Wang Soo licked his lips, round face squeezed in worry. It was a sketchy plan, but he could think of no other. And then he smiled at the indomitable little woman.

"Can do," he said, and darted into the living room.

He retrieved his knife and then tore the ripped sheet from the laundry bundle. Returning, he tore the sheet into strips and deftly bound Kratt's arms and legs. Satisfied the man could not escape, he turned and padded toward the outer door.

"Be careful," Missus Grady warned, and he smiled in return and stepped into the sunshine.

He began to run, and a hundred strides later he slowed his pace. He knew approximately where the sheriff was, but that was a good hour's travel. His hands fisted in sudden impotent futility.

He heard the sound from the corral and whirled in startled speed. Two horses were there, bony skulls ugly in the light, eyes wicked and insolent.

"So be it!" Wang Soo told the gods and shivered.

He raced to the corral. The horses backed nervously as he slid through the gate. Saddles were racked on a side bar, but he ignored them. He had never saddled a horse; he couldn't have done the job on a stuffed beast. And now, with bony-headed monsters moving nervously in the corral, he felt a nerve tic in his throat. He paused, irresolute, not knowing what to do. Bravery he had, but it extended only so far. After that, sanity took over.

HE TRIED to recall how a cowboy handled such a situation, and memory stirred in his mind. Flapping his arms, he hazed a horse into the stable. It shied past one stall and entered another. Wang Soo went ahead, stripping away his kimono coat.

He saw Lino Trujillo then. He lay where he had fallen, and blood was crusted on his shirt. He must have died almost instantly.

Wang Soo breathed a death prayer to the gods, then continued his pacing. The horse watched, not moving, ears flattening.

Wang Soo slid the stall bar into place, then entered the adjoining stall, holding the coat in both hands. He spoke in soothing

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Cantonese, then flung the coat over the horse's head. The beast quieted instantly.

Wang Soo sighed. He found the bit and slid it carefully beneath the coat, working it clumsily into the mouth. The bit finally slid into place, and he fumbled for the straps, buckling them.

Sliding the bar back, he led the horse from the stall. The horse followed without trouble, and they walked into the sunshine. Wang Soo marched to the corral fence, climbing, and then edged onto the wide bare back. Leaning forward, he drew the coat away.

There was an instant when nothing happened.

Then the horse exploded into movement. It went straight up and down, stiffened legs giving not at all. Wang Soo grunted. The horse whirled, sunfishing, and Wang Soo sat on air. Then the ground rushed up, and he struck hard, sprawling, clutching feebly for support. The horse whinnied, its mission accomplished, and then raced away, eyes dancing wickedly.

Wang Soo came groggily to his feet.

Doggedly, he picked up the kimono coat and approached the second horse. It stared incuriously, drooling. Gingerly, he flung the muffling blindfold and led the horse back to the fence. He found another bit and fitted it to the horse's head. His body ached.

He glared at the horse. He stared bleakly at the rolling land. He scowled at thought of the coming moments. Somehow, there was no envy in him for the cowboys who rode so fearlessly and blithely.

He climbed the fence and gently slid astride the wide back. The horse grunted tiredly at his weight. The ground seemed a thousand feet below. Almost did he decide to dismount.

He breathed a prayer and made a decision. For no other than Missus Grady and Mei Mei would he make such a sacrifice. At best, the ride would be a torturous thing, and yet it must be done. There was but one way in which it could be accomplished. He hoped his ancestors would understand. His hand clenched at his waist, and he closed his eyes and did the deed.

IT WAS late in the afternoon, and the Frisco stage had long since left. But the crowd of townspeople still pressed close to the bunting-decorated platform. They listened and they cheered, and the Mayor's voice went on and on and on.

Wang Soo stood proudly beside the Mayor and sheriff. He was newly dressed for this occasion, accoutred in the glorious raiment of a cowboy. His olive face beamed from beneath the brim of a towering white Stetson, and his heart thumped manfully behind a red and black checked shirt and tan vest of unborn calfskin. His boots gleamed in the light, pinching his toes, and the chaps were elegantly woolly and heavy.

He smiled at the crowd, and he saw the barber watched in respect now. Mei Mei stood at Wang Soo's side, listening to the English words, not truly understanding, knowing only that her new husband was a man of great importance in Rawhide.

"M—and so," the Mayor finished, "Wang Soo, our Wang Soo, went alone to face the Turkin gang. Intrepidly, he dared to risk his life to save that of Missus Grady. He faced the entire gang and almost subdued them. An accident saved them for the moment. Then, while held prisoner, he overpowered the guard and escaped."

Wang Soo blushed modestly.

"And then he rode a horse for help, bringing back the sheriff's posse in time to capture Turkin and his gang. They'll hang, after a fair trial, but that isn't important now. What is important is that this man, risked his life and rode a horse *barebacked* to save Missus Grady."

His voice rolled on and on, but Wang Soo wasn't listening. He was remembering that lonely ride across the plain. The horse had learned Wang Soo was master, and he had galloped furiously. Wang Soo had ridden it until he thought he was splitting up the middle, until he wanted nothing more than to get down and crawl home as best he could.

But that he would never admit. He had found the posse and screamed his message. Grim men had turned and thundered away, racing into the distance. He had not followed; instead, he had dismounted, his legs permanently bowed, or so he thought, and hours later staggered into Rawhide, battered, tired, completely spent.

"—and so, on behalf of the people of Rawhide and of the directors of the Mer-

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chants Bank, it gives me great pleasure, as mayor of our fair city, to present Wang Soo and his lovely bride with this thousand dollars in cash and a pair of silver spurs. May he put both to good use in the future, for Wang Soo is indeed an asset to Rawhide and very much of a *hombre.*"

WANG SOO swallowed, trying hard to keep the tears of pride from his eyes. Mei Mei's arm touched his, and he smiled deep into her eyes. Never, he knew, if he lived a dragon's age, could he ask for more glory for himself than that which he saw in her eyes.

"My fliends—" he began, taking off his Stetson.

"Aaiiee!" Mei Mei gasped. "Wang Soo, where is your queue?"

He beamed at her, swelling his chest beneath his cowboy shirt and vest. Pride lay in his voice, and he was completely the master of the situation.

"I am an American, what is called here a *hombre,*" he said softly in Cantonese. He smoothed his close-cropped jet hair. "I no longer wear the queue of the old country."

He saw the quick and proud understanding in her face, and for a moment his conscience twinged faintly. The haircut had been a matter of expediency.

And that, unlike the things ordered by custom between man and wife, would be forever his secret. On the altar of supreme duty had he sacrificed his glorious length of hair. He had slashed it away from his head with one swoop of his keen knife.

And then, using it as a rope, laboring long over the awkward task, he had managed to tie his feet beneath the belly of the horse in the Lazy S corral. Tied thus, he had ridden for the sheriff and the posse and sent them back toward Turkin's gang. In such a manner had he gained eminence in the favor of Rawhide and its people.

He looked at Mei Mei, and his heart quivered and trembled like a blob of quince jelly. She smiled tremulously, her love a vivid thing. He turned his gaze to the people of Rawhide, and he saw their respect for him, even Keever still now, waiting for his words.

A queue was a small price to pay for such esteem. The gods and his ancestors would understand; and when the time came to join them, they could pull him in by his hand.

His free hand sneaked out and closed over Mei Mei's slender fingers, and he glanced at the things extended to him by the Mayor.

The money he could use, but the spurs were a problem. Still, they might be good teething rings. For he knew he would never ride again.

For a part of the secret he would never tell was that he had tied himself to Lino Trujillo's old nag, a horse so decrepit and old he could have ridden it standing up. But that he would never tell, for a horse was a horse, and he had ridden one, and now he was truly a son of the West.

"Fliends and *hombles,*" he said to all. "I am humbly glateful——"

He was beaming, he was smiling, and his words came from his heart.

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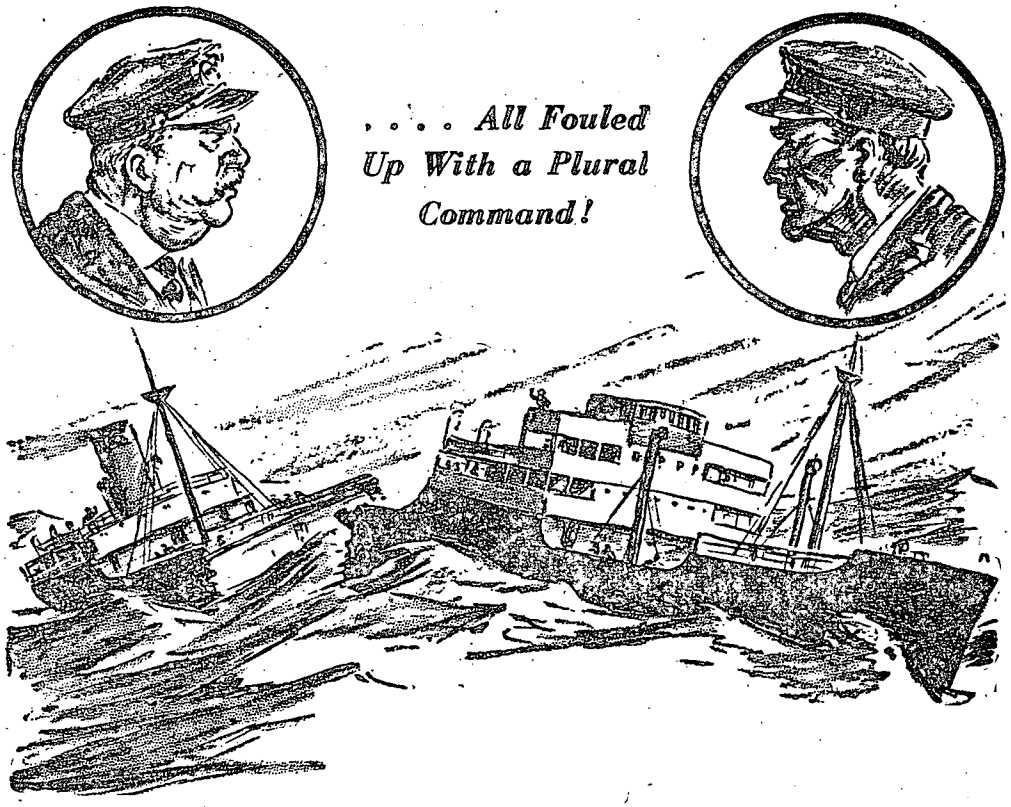

SHE'S YOUR SHIP, CAP'N

By H. FREDERIC YOUNG

BECAUSE the first officer is invariably the one to settle fo'c's'le disputes—and this matter above all else was one to be settled amongst the crew of the *Bailey Prince*—Swifty Stave's hairy throat gave a rasping and murderously inclined rumble. Swifty was the tall, whang-leather type of fellow with a gauntness of eye-socket and face and body that no amount of food-stowage could in the least affect. By virtue of his rank—though, Lord help him, as a matter of actual fact he had recently come to doubt its virtue—it was his duty to make the first say-so in the matter at hand, or out of hand, depending upon where you stood.

And although the inside of his thick skull was amply replete with a complete sea encyclopedia, perpetually brought up to snuff both through the medium of hard experience and reading matter, he was not at all positive what it was he wanted to say or, for that matter, whether he should, upon finding words, utter them at all.

As first officer of the freighter, *Bailey Prince*, Swifty Stave was half-frantic because he was the first, and nearly cursed the ambition that had led him to the examining board. Contrary to his present cautious approach to the matter, he was normally a man who liked stiff-knuckle action instead of patience. But the immediate possibility of mutiny on the high seas made it exceedingly difficult to do or say anything he mightn't later have tossed back in his tobacco-stained teeth. Admittedly—but secretly to himself, naturally—he was in a horrible state of confusion about the whole stinking mess.

It was not a matter, unfortunately, that could be laid before the captain for a deci-

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sion, because the *Bailey Prince* was all fouled up with a plural command.

He hunched his bony shoulders a couple times. Well, he couldn't stand there glowering silently until dawn. He drew in a short breath and began.

"Now, lissen to me, mates. I'm tossin' in my lot with Cap'n Rory McTern because he was the first one I seen aboard when we shoved off from Frisco." It was not the elaborate declaration he had hoped to make, but it was to the point, and that's what counted now.

"Captain Timothy Bullsmith was aboard first," countered Chris Dundee, the chief engineer. He spat sardonically at the bulkhead. "He was takin' hisself a shower bath—"

Mr. Stave shook his head till his cheeks quivered. "I never seen Captain Bullsmith until we was past the Farallones," he said. He made a spirited expression intended to draw comments from the thirty-odd crewmen gathered in the mess hall. No remarks came forth.

Finally a pair of thick-chested A. B.'s crowded to the forefront. "I've shipped with Captain Timothy Bullsmith since '38," they both stated in one angry breath. "He's the Old Man far as I'm concerned—" The way they stood shoulder to shoulder put up a stiff argument.

That seemed to tip the scales for action. The second officer, a stocky, red-cheeked fellow named Krassen, crowded over with the two A. B.'s, nodding his head sharply. "Me, too," he said. "It's Captain Bullsmith for me, mates—"

"It's out-and-out mutiny!" the first officer charged. "I'll have you in irons—"

"Ker-humph, if I may interrupt, Mister Stave," said the chief engineer. "No matter what cha say, it ain't gonna be no mutiny. Regulations say, if I may put a few facts in my own words, that should a man defy and otherwise tell the skipper of a ship to go t'hell, and refuse his assigned duty as such, then he can be tossed in irons and can rightly be accused of mutinous action. Whereas, Mister Stave, if they's two skippers aboard on account of some lout-headed dodo in the shipping office then who's to say which skipper is skipper. 'Specially when one says port and t'other starb'd every time whichaway or any other subject arises. Oh, no, Mister Stave. It ain't mutiny no way you look at it." There was no denying his statement, and he grinned confidently.

"I take it you're a Captain Bullsmith man, Mister Dundee!" Swifty Stave remarked with heavy sarcasm.

"That I am. That I am." Dundee's reply was prompt. He gazed roundly at the crewmen.

It was nearing nightfall, and the blackish hulk of the ship was peppered with light blobs. The massive star-clusters over the Indian Ocean were screened through high clouds and the water was a mass of wind-driven combers flickering with white teeth snapping back at the wind. The panorama of the heavens was fast blurring over with heavy cloud. The wind kept straining for a higher note as it shouldered against the *Bailey Prince*.

FOR the past three days the freighter *Bailey Prince* had had her course altered so often, first toward Madras, India, thence back again toward the Malacca Straits and Singapore, that everyone aboard was getting groggy with the exception, perhaps, of resolute and hard-headed Captain Timothy Bullsmith, and resolute and hard-headed Captain Rory McTern. Her forward holds were filled to capacity with commodities consigned to Singapore. In her after holds were crates of chemicals destined for Madras. They had unloaded a deck cargo of machinery in Sydney, made a run under the Great Australian Bight toward the Indian Ocean and now in the confoundment of dual command at loggerheads, she whipsawed back and forth until she resembled a helmless derelict.

Wheezing throatily a moment, and with what he alleged to be patience swiftly approaching a point of utter exhaustion, the first officer's face was like that of a half-baked frustrated knife juggler.

"Dammit!" he said. "Who'll say Captain Rory McTern is skipper of this craft?"

"I will!"

"Me, sir!"

"I, sir, Mister Stave—"

"Captain Bullsmith is me skipper, sir!"

"I'll take orders from Old Man Bullsmith—"

And so it went, a ship's crew halved by

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sentiment and personal likes and dislikes. As a crewman would step into Captain McTern's circle, the gaunt face of the first officer would twitch and light up fondly, and he'd emit a triumphant snort. Likewise, Mister Dundee got in several satisfied grunts and many sarcastic, "Ker-humphs!" The result by actual tabulation was seventeen to seventeen, the second and third engineers having pledged their allegiance to Captain McTern, whereas the second and third deck officers had cast their lot with Captain Timothy Bullsmith.

"You've been using underhanded politics on the side," sniffed Mister Stave, choking back some bestial snarls that lay at the root of his tongue.

"Ker-hum!" Mr. Dundee announced, though not entirely happy.

IN THE skippers' (plural) cabin 'midships there was as usual a great, strife-laden hush, punctuated only by the wary shifting of eyes across charts.

At one end of a spacious chart desk, Captain Rory McTern with grayish, red-tinted whiskers a-bristle was occupied in the task of tracing a crooked forefinger over a chart. McTern was a short man, about five foot six, and comfortably rotund. He wore his hair horseshoe style, a fringe now sadly in need of cropping over the wrinkled ears and at the sunburnt nape.

At the opposite end of the chart desk was Captain Timothy Bullsmith, a cold sneer like wax across his long, adz-like face, with his gray, overhanging brows popping up and down while a stubborn knot went up and down at the turn of each angular jawbone. When standing erect his head reached six feet, and he had a wiry, broad frame.

During the war, these two grizzled skippers were the scourge of the Maritime service. Anecdotes of their ruthless behavior in the face of staid rules and regulations has since passed through so many port-holes and been hashed and re-hashed in so many mess halls that there remains scarcely a recognizable line between truth and fiction. And yet even the tallest and hoariest of sea tales usually sprout from seedlings of truth, so it is nearly impossible to totally discount any tale of this pair that you may pick up anywhere from Timor to Port Said.

About the choicest morsel of deck scuttlebut concerning Mister McTern, went about like this: It was on the Murmansk run, and the entire convoy had been, as usual, engaged in the tittery game of war charades. Captain Rory McTern, pacing the deck over a hundred and ten thousand barrels of hi-test gasoline, amused himself during daylight hours by wig-wagging bantering tirades across the open water to the skipper of a freighter with the convoy number 27, and the name *S. S. Fanny DeMarr* cloaked over with gray war paint. Skippering 27 and shooting back sarcasm for sarcasm was long-armed Captain Bullsmith.

About dusk of one sleety night, Mr. McTern watched Captain Bullsmith's craft start limping, then fall back out of formation to take pot-luck with enemy subs. Ship after ship steered round number 27, for that was the hard and fast rule. If your ship went lame, you drifted back out of formation and were obliged to take pot-luck on your own.

Upon seeing Captain Bullsmith's ship drifting helplessly back into oblivion, McTern dedicated his talents to some unmilitant scheming with himself, and was snorting impatiently by the time darkness descended upon the convoy at a point approximately where Lat. 0 intersects the Arctic Circle. The breeze lacing into the salt spray was like chunks of ice. Captain McTern assumed charge of the helm and began some skillful and mystic maneuvering while his second mate, who was in subordinate command of the watch, looked on aghast and felt his temperature rising.

McTern's ship, Convoy No. 17—meaning it was seventh back in the first line—scudded away obviously toward nowhere. One of the destroyer escorts started to investigate the matter, but its skipper suddenly remembered the rules of war and let McTern's ship drift away unmolested by questions.

And once clear of the convoy proper, the old man chuckled coyly. "Hya-ak!" he chortled. "Now take the wheel back, Mr. Long, an' lemme borrow yer night-glasses."

An hour and a half of veering his ship to and fro through the semi-darkness and Captain McTern was at the helm once more sidling his 17 alongside the dead hulk of Bullsmith's charge. He turned the wheel

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back to his second and clambered out on the boat deck.

"Bullsmith, ahoy!" McTern yelped. "Hey—ye frazzle-nosed, worn-out lobster, ye!"

Bullsmith came back with a challenging accusation. "Yu've broke the rules o' war, yu' clabber-brained bag o' wind! I'll report yu' an' see yu're court-martialed right an' proper. What's on that parboiled thing yu' allege to be a brain?"

"I've come back to give ye a lesson in seamanship," snorted McTern. "I've rigged a hawser astern to tow ye. Meanwhile, get yer crew to riggin' up a breeches-buoy so's I can send my repair crew across to help ye. What's yer trouble?"

"Bearing out oin the main engine—"

FOR six hours with the boilers of his ship nearly popping, McTern towed the crippled 27 while adequate repairs were made. It was nearly noon of the next day when the two ships again made contact with the convoy and eased back into formation. The admiral in command of the convoy chose to ignore this feat of heroism, and McTern in all probability missed out on a nice citation. But to report the incident was to bring the wrath of the war department down on McTern's head. So it resolved into one of those anecdotes that time elaborated and which never fell of its own ponderous weight.

Take another time. In the south-seas theatre. The convoy system was prone to believe that a ship was reasonably safe on its own until it approached within hailing distance of New Guinea. In nearly all instances, the system was correct. Other times, not so good.

As for example the morning Captain Timothy Bullsmith was standing splay-footed on the bridge deck sweeping the sea with his binoculars just in case a stray Jap sub might've somehow slipped past the navy's sharp nose. He suddenly lowered his glasses and began making frantic motions to his first officer, a young, keen-eyed graduate named Adams.

"Mister Adams," said the skipper. "Take my glasses here an' take a squint about three points off the starb'd bow an' tell me what's there."

Mister Adams squinted earnestly through the skipper's glasses.

"It's pretty hazy out there, sir—but it looks to me like it's a submarine towing a tanker."

The skipper grinned with his long teeth. "Ah,hah!" he said. "Now I just thought that's what it was. Now have another look, mister. What kind of a sub would it be?"

"Jap, I'd say, sir."

"Correct!"

The captain considered the high-explosive gasoline in the tanks below, and he remembered Jap subs carry deck guns as large as five-inchers. He squinted at the young navy gun-crew lounging around their own three-inch piece.

"Are we going to attack, sir?" asked Adams.

"We-ell—s'pose we just stalk the devil a spell, Mister Adams. Meanwhile——" His brow made deep furrows as he took the glasses and again studied the scene. The Jap certainly had a prize worth towing into Jap waters if he could make it. And, concluded Captain Bullsmith, if I'm not daft, that's Rory McTern he's got in tow.

Fortunately no additional craft of the Jap navy appeared. It was impossible to send a message for help, because Jap aid might after all be the nearest. So he was content to alter his course and stalk the pair until dusk. Meanwhile, he had had his crew rig up a deck-level sea-valve contraption working out of the stern tanks, and connected to a pressure pump.

As dusk approached, Bullsmith scooted his ship off at a tangent, and with slow speed aided by his current charts he was by full dark in a position favorable to his plan.

His first command was, "Full speed ahead!" The A. B. at the helm jabbed the indicator with the butt of one hand and for an instant the tanker ducked her stern as the screws threshed, then shot forward.

Captain Bullsmith sprinted out and yelled down from the boat deck, "Start the contraption, men!"

From the nozzle-end of an overboard discharge projected overside about forty feet and held in place with stay-cables, a whitish stream shot. They crossed the Jap's bow spewing gasoline and, as Bullsmith had anticipated, the Japs began peppering with their deck machine guns. And likewise as Bullsmith had figured—aye, prayed—the

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flicks of fire spatting from the sub's deck guns ignited the gasoline.

At the first sign of flame, the gasoline valve was shut and Bullsmith loped back and grabbed the helm and veered the craft hard a-port and wheeled out of range of the gasoline spread on the water.

A great sheet of flame was eating up the Jap, and by its flare Bullsmith saw the men aboard McTern's ship chopping away at the hawser and going for the Japs aboard their captive ship. He stuck around long enough to see that McTern had the situation in command, then he blatted a deriding hoot on the ship's whistle and was on his way.

WHAT with anecdotes of that nature riding the high seas from Fiji to Cape Horn, you can probably understand why none of the crew of the *Bailey Prince* was electrified with surprise when two skippers turned up that morning. It was as natural as sea-wind for Captain McTern and Captain Bullsmith to be lodged in such a spot.

They had shoved off at 4 a.m, creeping under the critical eye of their pilot out through the fog-shrouded Golden Gate.

Following three blustery weeks on dry land, Captain Bullsmith upon boarding the *Bailey Prince* proceeded to the skipper's cabin to shave and take the wrinkles out of his uniform. The first mate seemed to be managing everything first rate, so after dunking himself lengthily in a shower, Bullsmith grunted wearily and stretched his lank figure in the bunk for forty fast and needed winks. It seemed to him but a moment later that a rasping laugh shook his sensitive eardrums.

"We-el, we-el!" exclaimed Captain Rory McTern.

At first McTern had been furious at discovering a body in his bunk. But seeing Timothy Bullsmith's hatchet face blinking owlishly up at him, anger left and levity dove-tailed right into the situation.

"Yee-eah! Haw-haw! Bullsmith, ye drunken ol' boot! Why, man, ye're on the wrong ship!" McTern beamed happily and rubbed his palms, prepared to do some murderous ribbing.

Beneath the gray blanket, Captain Bullsmith glared glumly a moment, toyed with thoughts of the fire-axe hanging in the bulkhead bracket, made a suspicious frown, then he, too, glowed with the utter humor of the matter.

"Ah-ah-ah-ah-h!" he chortled past the edge of the blanket. "Son of a gun, McTern, I gotcha gigged like a perch this time. It's you, burn your blubbery carcass, that's on the wrong ship!" He came out of the bunk and stood there in his long underwear. He finally climbed into his uniform. "Wel-l!" he stated. "Git your gear ready an' I'll put you off with the pilot at the Farallones."

"Me?" Captain McTern stiffened. "Ye drunken ol' codger! This is my ship. The *Bailey Prince*. I got m'orders here—" He groped in the inside pocket of his coat.

"Ah," said Captain Bullsmith, getting a little sarcastic. "It's no doubt the *Valiant Prince* yu've in mind. What you need is new specs. Read your orders again, matey."

"I don't have to read 'em again!" McTern shot back. "Ye read yer own orders—" He jammed his papers under the other's twitchy nose.

"Hell an' be dammit!" said Bullsmith shakily. "A blasted office mix-up. We-ell, I was aboard first, McTern. Its merely a mix-up in the head office. They'll straighten you out when you get back—"

"I ain't goin' back, Mister!"

Bullsmith smiled politely. "Come, now, matey—what say we don't get fouled up in no muddle. Just get your——"

"Ye get yer gear packed!" McTern shouted, his glare implacable. "I'm skipper o' this here craft!"

"T'hell y'are!"

"T'hell I ain't!"

Silence ensued for the following thirty minutes while both men upended the ship's library in search of a ruling. None could be found.

When at length—three days later—the situation was admittedly checkmated, first officer Swifty Stave came forward with a timid suggestion.

"Everythin's all fouled up—er—Captains," he said with dual respect. "Now, mebbe the command could be rightly settled by fair methods." He tried a bright smile, and it withered away. "Now, here's what I figgered, sirs—just settle it man to man like this: The skipper wot's been to sea the longest takes command."

Captain McTern snorted in disgust. "It

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won't work, Mister Stave. We both shipp'd as ordinary seaman the same day on the same ship."

"Back in '92, that there was," grumbled Bullsmith.

McTern nodded glumly in agreement.

For a moment only was Swifty Stave nonplussed for a solution to this unexpected turn. "Well"—he suggested—"how about this here one? The first man to reach the grade of junior officer."

"We passed the examination at the same time!" snapped McTern.

Bullsmith nodded.

"Uh——" stammered the first officer. "Why—here's another idea, sirs. This'll do it all nice an' shipshape like. Now—who received his master's papers first?"

"We passed that examination the same day." It was McTern again.

"Well, well," said the first officer, backing out of the captains' cabin. "It seems that the works is fouled up."

EVERYTHING was. But as far as their first port of call, Australia, they had smooth sailing. And though fisticuffs had at first been a constant threat in the background, it was finally agreed the skippers should alternate the command on the bridge—four on and four hours off. This was the solemn agreement and it stood undamaged until, passing Freemantle, Captain McTern's orders said the next port of call was Madras, whereas Captain Bullsmith's papers clearly stated that Singapore was the next scheduled stop.

So it was that for three days the *Bailey Prince* had for one four-hour watch plowed unerringly toward Madras, India, thence wheeled hard over and began churning in the direction of Singapore.

It was sufficient to drive the vessel's crew daffy, and incite near murder. It couldn't last very much longer without physical casualties. It didn't. A hundred tales will unfold from it, far more frenzied than this true account.

And as both skippers appeared to be vastly engrossed in the charts each was now scanning, their casualness was merely a fixed mask beneath which smoldered plans and devices as a means of scuttling the competition.

"Ye've completely hashed yer noble sea record, Mister," said McTern, glaring at his crooked finger.

"Ah-ah-ah!" Captain Bullsmith sneered. The ship yawed a moment, then lurched and trembled from bow to fantail. Bullsmith steadied himself. "You're finally gonta collect your just dues, McTern."

An enormous swell picked the *Bailey Prince* up and she wallowed clumsily in the boiling pool of foam as the comber set her down again with a tremendous smacking of her bottom.

"Aye," commented McTern. He shook his head sadly. " 'Tis pity I have fer a man the likes of ye, Bullsmith."

"Ah!" the other agreed. "Too bad a old man like you'll be happy to get a berth as second on a hog scow—"

THE *Bailey Prince* began lifting her broad head to butt into the growing intensity of the intermittent cliffs of wind that swirled with a monotone voice. She slewed port and starboard as if to try one shoulder and then the other. Combers half-torn into white-spewing shreds raced swiftly to wrench and shake the vessel. And when first officer Stave finally retreated from the meeting in the mess hall, he squinted in half-alarm at the skies and sniffed expertly, then his long legs pounded the deck toward the skippers' quarters.

He bounded through the doorway unceremoniously. "Captains," he blurted out. "They's a willy-willy storm breakin' fast."

"Lay a course due south," said Capain McTern brusquely. "Willy-willy storms usually break outa nor'east. We'll ride her out. . . ."

"They break from any point!" snapped Bullsmith doggedly. "Hold the present course, mister."

"Aye, sir," said the first officer to Captain McTern. Bullsmith whirled, flaring. "Aye, sir," gulped Stave dryly. He wheeled round and stomped toward the wheelhouse.

Contrary to command orders, the willy-willy storm literally flexed its powerful muscles and began slamming in real, knock-out punches. The *Bailey Prince* went through all the nautical antics short of ducking her nose and knocking on the gilded door of Fiddler's Green, to dislodge her crew and continue to Davy Jones' locker.

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She was heaving and tossing like an overworked percheron. The storm broke with true willy-willy speed, and heavy rain came down in thundering, sworling masses. Orders be damned in the face of that—orders were flounced back at the teeth that gave them.

McTern donned yellow oilskins and so'-wester and landed on the poop deck. He stood there bawling orders above the noise of screaming stays and lurching cargo booms, one hand clenched to the salt-crusted rail.

Captain Bullsmith worked the deck from the fo'c's'le aft to the bridge deck.

Hatches were battened and gear lashed securely. The *Bailey Prince* was tossed about like a tin bucket, occasionally emitting great, cracking sounds of complaint.

Dawn broke with the willy-willy storm racing northward toward Sumatra and Java. And the tail of the storm raked the waters behind it until it appeared like greenish, ruffled silk.

In the suddenly calm sea, Captain McTern was gruffly counting his crew astern and nodding his head in approval. While forward, Captain Bullsmith took a count on his men.

And finally as though eager to exhibit not one whit of partiality, the *Bailey Prince* began a strange and eerie groaning at a point amidships.

McTern, on the poop deck, stiffened. A tingling emerged from the deck plates and tickled the soles of his splayed feet.

BY NOW it was plain to one and all what was transpiring.

Bullsmith's voice roared out from the bridge deck.

"The old crate's breaking in half! Haeay-ah! Man the lifeboats!"

A ripping shock quivered with earthquake force the length of the vessel. Then deck plates began bulging and groaning, and the hull plates began cracking like peanut shells. Right down through the skippers' quarters a jagged aperture appeared, then the cleavage opened wider and raced like mad the breadth of the ship and down the hull through the midship cofferdam toward the double-bottom tanks.

It was over and done in less time than a minute. With a final screeching jerk, the forward half of the *Bailey Prince* drifted away from the stern.

"Man the lifeboats!" thundered Bullsmith.

Captain McTern was leaping across deck with short-legged strides. Bullsmith's voice reached him and he halted.

"Desartin' yer ship like the goggle-eyed weasel ye are!" he chirped across fifty feet of water.

"It's all your fault!" Bullsmith shot back. "You was skipper of the ship—"

"T'hell I was!" McTern yelled defensively. He teetered spraddle-legged as the stern bobbed around a few moments then settled to a respectable keel. "It was yer command, ye axe-jawed—"

"You said yourse'f you was skipper—" Bullsmith turned to his crew on the forward half of the *Bailey Prince*. "Stand fast, men. She's busted right down through the cofferdam, and likely the cargo against the aft bulkhead will keep her from crashing in and flooding the rest of the ship." He stalked over and peered down across the port rail. "She's ain't settlin' any more." Then he perched himself precariously near the torn edge of the ship. "Ahoy, there, you grannified skipper wot oughta be swingin' a oar on a wash tub. You better cast us a line so's we won't drift too far apart."

Captain McTern bristled. "Are ye givin' orders to my ship, Captain Bullsmith, who oughta be warshin' pots in the galley of a mud scow? Ye hustle an' tell yer man Sparks to git some S. O. S.'s in the air."

"I'll have you understan' I'm full able to command my own vessel without outside help!" Bullsmith yelled back.

"Haw!" screamed McTern, his face red. "Wot a ship ye've got, matey""

"Ya-ya-ya!" said Bullsmith. "If the *Bailey Prince* was a horse, you know which end you'd be skipper of!"

"Ye'll be demoted to cabin-boy of a garbage scow when I git my say-so at the hearing!" McTern said. He whirled to his crew. "We better take a squint below deck, men," he said. "If this tub is gonna float, we got a chance of bein' picked up and towed to port. Fall to, men!"

As the aft-end of the *Bailey Prince* bobbed easily in the glass-smooth sea, McTern led his crew below on an inspection tour. The cargo dunnage had withstood the

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shock very well, and the aft bulkhead of the midship cofferdam, other than a few leaky rivets, seemed in good shape to withstand the outward pressure. Then all converged in the galley, and though everything was a-tilt with pots and pans and gear piled at one end, McTern adjudged the possibilities of eating were favorable indeed.

"Haw, haw!" he finally exploded mirthfully. "We got the best end of the ship, after all. We got the food lockers and the galley." He squinted at his crew. "Here, Greasy—think ye could stir up some chow? Mebbe we can build a fire in the cook range outa the dunnage off the deck cargo we unloaded in 'Stralia."

IT WASN'T long till they had a fire of sorts roaring in the big range. Great hams and a crate of eggs was taken from the food locker, and soon the air was alive with savory smells.

"Now," said McTern, when every crewman had a plate full, "we're gonna march out on deck and let Bullsmith and his crew see who got the best half o' the *Bailey Prince*. Haw—we'll soon see who got the best half' o the horse—er, ship, is what I mean, lads."

"How'd ye like a order o' ham an', Skipper Bullsmith," McTern shouted gleefully.

From his teetery command, Bullsmith glared murderously. He swiped at his lips with his tongue. The scent of hot food and coffee wafted tantalizingly across the open seawater. The crewmen of the forward half of the *Bailey Prince* stood in a hungry semicircle, watching. Bullsmith cursed and his face grew mottled and he paced his deck in silence.

Wiping his mouth with his sleeve and making a great to-do over picking succulent chunks of fat ham from his teeth and spitting them on deck and grinding them underfoot, Captain McTern patted his full stomach.

"Now, Cap'n Bullsmith," he said, "I s'pose by now ye've had yer man Sparks contact rescue parties. I'd appreciate a report, if it's all the same to ye."

A pleasant bellow burst from Bullsmith's throat. "Now wouldn't you just like to know, Cap'n McTern? Mebbe the radio equipment is all busted t'hell. Mebbe we can't get a message across. Mebbe we're gonna lay here and drift off the regular passage course. Wouldn't you just like to know, matey." He twisted his lips sardonically. The pangs of hunger inside him lessened.

"Oh, come now, Bullsmith," McTern said in a wheedling tone. "If we oughta take to the lifeboats, then it's yer duty as a sea cap'n to let us know."

"Ya-ya-ya!" came from Bullsmith's direction. He sauntered around smiling pleasantly, his nostrils picking up small scents of ham and eggs and coffee.

"Ye're bustin' the rules of the sea, Bullsmith!" thundered McTern.

Bullsmith eyed McTern. "I'll make an honest swap with you, McTern. You cook us up some chow and we'll lower one of lifeboats and come across and pick it up. And we'll keep you posted on what we might—or might not—be getting on the radio."

"Well—" McTern swallowed dryly, "we wasn't intendin' to let yer starve; all right, it's a bargain. What've ye heard?"

Bullsmith squinted shrewdly across at McTern. "We'll tell you that after we've had our chow, matey."

McTern nervously paced the deck while watching the forward-end crew stuff themselves with food. Then Captain Bullsmith cupped his hands to his lips.

"We've contacted two ships that oughta be here by dark," he yelled.

It was early dusk when two ships converged on the scene of disaster.

"Take me to Singapore!" Captain Bullsmith yelled to the ship that had his craft in tow."

"Madras!" yelled McTern.

IT WAS a few weeks later in the shipping office in San Francisco. Captain McTern was nervously facing a dozen men comprising the board of inquiry.

"I tell ye, gentlemen," McTern stated. "It was all my fault, the whole mess. I gave orders and—" He related point by point to the board the facts that led up to the moment the *Bailey Prince* parted. "Yes, sirs," he conceded gravely, "I just wouldn't listen to the sage counsel of Captain Bullsmith."

"We'll take your report under advisement," he was told.

As he passed through the anteroom, Cap-

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tain Bullsmith was hunched in a chair. The two men glared hard at each other.

"Go in an' spill yer guts, Bullsmith!" McTern growled.

Captain Bullsmith inched inside the room and stood before the board. "I should've taken the sage counsel of Cap'n McTern on the whole matter, gents," he said. And recounted his version of the affair.

"You are excused while the board considers the facts, Captain Bullsmith."

As the door slammed behind Captain Bullsmith's hunched figure, the men around the table grinned knowingly at each other. Finally the man at the head of the table spoke up.

"Perhaps we should let them suffer in silence a while, gentlemen, before we tell them that inspection disclosed the *Bailey Prince* was the victim of a progressive rupture—"

While down at the corner bar, McTern was shaking a bottle of Scotch and watching the beads form and melt away.

"I tell ye, Mac," he said to the bartender, "that old foozle of a Bullsmith is all warshed out as a skipper. Lemme tell ye about his latest trip. He was skipper of the *Bailey Prince—*"

"Who was skipper of the *Bailey Prince?*" roared a voice at McTern's back.

"Why, Captain Bullsmith!" said McTern surprisedly. "Come . . . I've just purchased a entire bottle of Scotch. Here, Mac, get the skipper a glass. Hop up on this stool next to me, Skipper. I was just gonna tell Mac, here, how it was your sage counsel that saved every man aboard the *Bailey Prince* from horrible death."

"Ah," said Bullsmith, reaching for the empty glass and holding it toward the bottle in McTern's hand. "Don't you believe a word this here old codger tells you, Mac. It's him that done the job."

LOOSE LIP LOCK was sure he knew more about submersible activities around Federal Proving Ground than the FBI, any amount of Army Brass, or the Pilots. He maintained he did more work per man-hours than the mainspring in the timeclock itself—and he wasn't a bit proud about helping top-level executives—civilian or military. . . .

"Loose Lip Adds One Up"

by

A. A. CAFFREY

In the next SHORT STORIES

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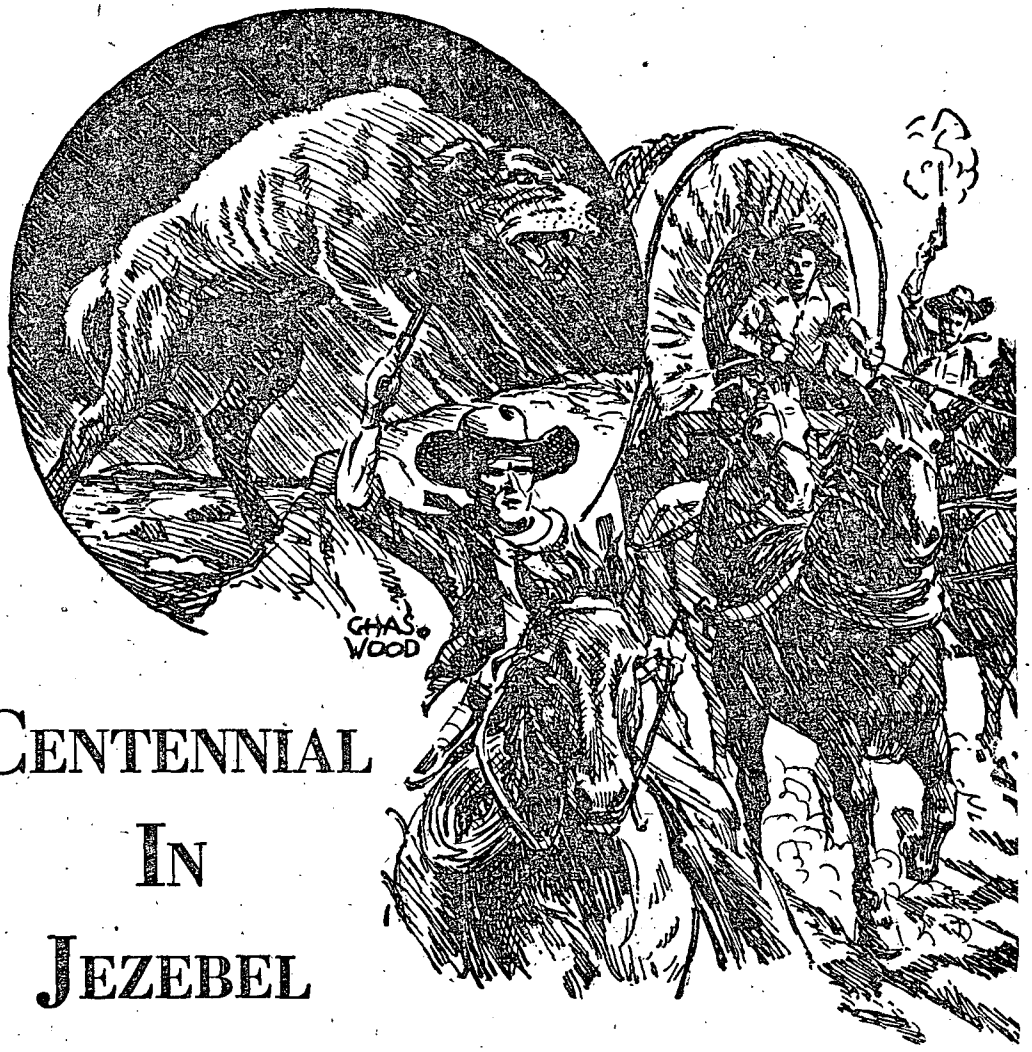

CENTENNIAL IN JEZEBEL

"UNION" JONES, tramp printer extraordinary of Major "Shenandoah" Smyth's Jezebel *Courier* shifted the burdened sack he toted with a shrug and his copped-toed boots beat a sturdy rataplan on the boardwalk of Silver Street. Grizzled beard and big nose jutting, blazing red face perspiring with honest toil, sombrero jauntily tilted on the back of his bald, desert-tanned cranium he shouldered an indomitable path toward the Arizona Palace Saloon. Ahead of him raced Plutarco Herrera, his printer's devil, yowling shrilly.

"Hot tamale! Hot tamale! Great pageant of Senor Union Jones!"

Hands clutched eagerly for the dodgers Pluto was passing out, his progress was not only speedy but dramatic. In the desert sunshine the main street of tempestuous, unpredictable, boomtown Jezebel seethed with traffic as usual but now the traffic was passing on both sides of a wide wooden stage erected in the center of the street with some kind of mysterious skeleton framework cluttering it. A high-walled chute ran steeply down from the top rear of the framework, emerging from what looked like a huge oat bin, and hung out over the sand.

With a thud Union dropped his sack as he reached the swinging doors of the Arizona Palace and straightened up. Pluto came running back through the crowd, his appallingly handsome fifteen-year-old face wreathed in smiles.

"More, Senor Jones!" he urged. "Behold, the street is agog!"

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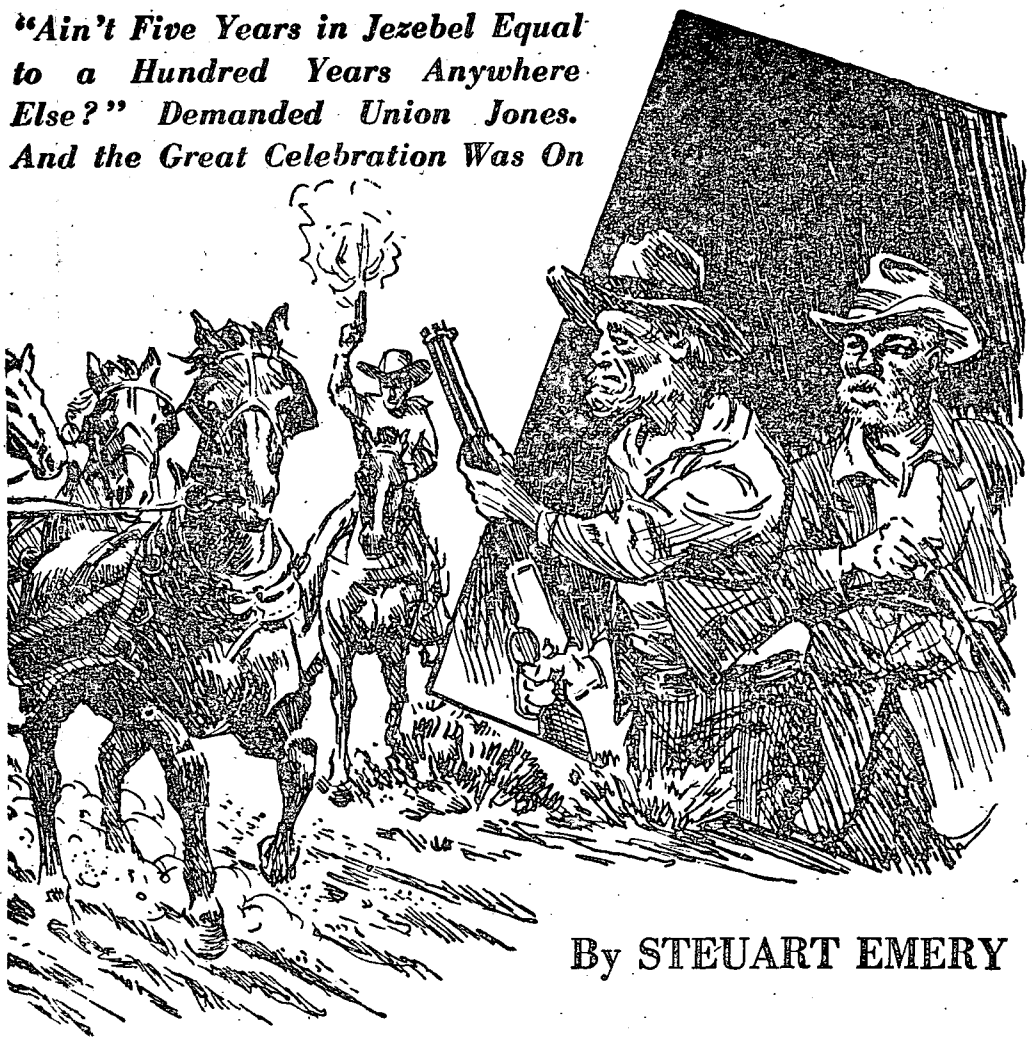
"Ain't Five Years in Jezebel Equal to a Hundred Years Anywhere Else?" Demanded Union Jones. And the Great Celebration Was On



By STEUART EMERY

Union dumped the sack's contents on the planking. It consisted of bundles of neatly-tied dodgers.

"Spread these around the Mesa Saloon an' Diamond Jack Hoag's Faro Bank an' respectable similar establishments an' stay outer the buckets o' blood, Pluto," he ordered. "Leave 'em on the bar fer the customers ter grab fer free like it was a bit o' lunch. They will. I shall repair inter the Palace with my own stack."

"Tamale, hot tamale!" howled Pluto, loading up. "The magnificent pageant of Senor Jones!"

"Whut the heck?" inquired a lugubrious-faced citizen, comfortably poised on the nearest empty barrel. "I jest got back from a visit ter Paradise, Union. Air yuh raisin' illegitimate funds fer yoreself in yore old age? And whut air that chute on that platform fer? You gonna slide down it inter a tub o' water and git yore sins washed—away?"

"I am raisin' no illegitimate funds fer my old age, an' who be you ter talk about sins?" snorted Union. "This pageant be fer the benefit o' the mission. Through that chute will pour at noon tomorrer a river o' gleamin' gold. Eighty thousand bucks wuth o' jolly yaller boys will come a-bouncin' and a-flowin' down that flume."

"Huh?" The questioner's jaw became practically dislocated in amazement. "Huh—whaaa—!"

"Read the paper in yore hand," said Union loftily. "Jezebel be celebratin' her centennial anniversity tomorrer in a pageant exclusively written an' master-minded by

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Union Jones, o' the Old Commonwealth o' Massachusetts fambly o' Joneses, which be used ter havin' their own centennial anniversities every so now an' then surrounded by apple pie an' descendants."

"There air a cheat in it somewheres," sagely observed a bearded miner, who was whittling on the next barrel. "Any pie which Union Jones he has got a finger in has got a sour apple in it."

"You have bin drunk fer the last week," said Union reprovingly, "or you too would o' heerd what be goin' on fer tomorrer. However, that be not unusual fer a citizen o' Jezebel, which reminds me it be time fer my own noontide libation of Old Merry Panther Screech."

HE SHOVED through the batwings into the low-raftered, crowded premises of the Arizona Palace and breasted the bar, slapping down his pile of dodgers. Push-'em-Up Regan, fastest bartender west of the Pecos, small, and spruce, appeared from nowhere and thrust the bottle and glass in front of him.

"What is this noosprint, Union?" he asked with his customary air of cynical amiability. "We can use noosprint in the Palace. We have run outer the roller towel in the washroom fer the boys ter dry their hands on."

"This be termorrer's program out today," said Union. "All last nite I have bin a-moilin' an' a-toilin' printin' 'em up at the *Courier*. I writ it myself jest as I have writ my own lines fer the pageant. Read it, Push-'em-Up, you got as fur as the fourth grade, didn't you? Meantime, I shall refresh my prodijius memory by jest re-readin' it myself."

Union conned the handbill, beaming in righteous pride. Its words proclaimed in no uncertain lettering:

For One Day Only
JEZEBEL CENTENNIAL PAGEANT
Written and Directed By Union Jones

DRAMATIS PERSONAE
Miss Sadie Hostetter,
Representing the Spirit of Jezebel,
in a Stirring Centennial Ode
Followed by
the Grand Entrance of
JEDEBIAH UNION JONES
as
THE FOUNDING FATHER
Who Will
STRIKE HIS PICK
AGAINST THE ROCK
Which in Turn Will
GUSH INCREDIBLE RICHES!!!
and
500 Old Settlers, Horses, Wagons, Cowboys
and Miners Will Re-enact
THE ORIGINAL TREASURE RUSH
In Conclusion:
The Prophet Jimberjaw in a
Glorious Forecast of Jezebel's Future
All for the Benefit of the Mission
Tickets $1

"Ah!" Union's breast swelled under his flannel shirt, as he swung to face the thronged room where the click of the roulette ball and the clash of poker chips sounded at the tables. "This be fer distribution free, feller inmates o' Jezebel. Do not kill me in the rush. On secind thought, Slewfoot Lum will distribute ter the cash customers."

The wizened swamper, grinning, stumped around dealing out the dodgers. Brows bent over them, knotted with difficulty. The miners, range riders and general citizenry of Jezebel were not noted for profound education. The buzz of curiosity sounded immediately.

"Union," said Push-'em-Up, setting down his copy. "You have stole the show. Nacherally I know about the layout for this great historical pageant but you have changed it around so that the mission will take in the cash offen the ticket sales but Union Jones gits all the publicity. Also you have made it a centennial anniversary, which is one hundred years and Jezebel has bin around only five."

"Five years in Jezebel be the equal o' one hundred years anywheres else, ain't they?" demanded Union. "How many o' Jezebel's early settlers are walkin' around above ground an' not in Boot Hill terday? It be high time Jezebel had a show about itself so I got it up, like you know. Havin' got it up I gotter right ter play the Foundin' Father, ain't I?"

He lifted his double shot of Old Merry Panther Screech and it vanished in his

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beard. "Arrgh—warrgh—one more libation, Push-'em-Up, fer the Foundin' Father."

"Oh, ho, ho!" bellowed a citizen. "You will be Foundered Father, you keep that up, Union."

"Hooray, fer Union Jones an' his show!" roared another customer.

"I thank you, my friends," said Union. "Without fear or favor, with only the nobles motives in mind, we shall present termorrer at high noon in the main street a show sech as will ring through the corridors o' Jezebel's history an' honky tonks. It will be unrivalled, without competition—"

The sudden murmur of the curious crowd drifted in from the street outside. There were loud yells, as of welcome. A townsman shoved his nose close to the plate glass window and stared out and westward.

"Ter heck with Union Jones an' his hysterical pageant!" he roared. "We have got us a Tom show, jest arrived in town this minnit! I kin see Simon Legree an' the bloodhounds from here! Call off yore damn Union Jones show, we wanta see Elizy chased acrost the ice and little golden-haired Eva arisin' ter Heaven."

"Tom show!" rose the clamor from Silver Street. "Uncle Tom's Cabin has come ter Jezebel!"

"Greaat godfrey!" exclaimed Union, jaw dropping. "The pageant be finished. They ain't no show ever writ kin play against an Uncle Tom's Cabin acrost the street."

He blundered out of the door onto the boardwalk. Almost directly in front of the Arizona Palace the freighter had pulled up, the travellers it carried had descended and stood in a group in the street. Dominating the group was a man of powerful, rangy physique with massive, granitelike jaw, raven-black sweeping mustaches, and knee-high black boots, who held a thick bamboo cane in one hand and a steel chain leash in the other. On the end of the metal leash poised a tremendous mastiff, muscles rippling under its brindled coat, heavy jaw low, fanglike teeth bared. It growled and tugged, at its brass-spiked collar, savagery pulsated in it. It was a perfect picture of Simon Legree and a Tom show bloodhound except that the man wore a blue tunic instead of plantation clothes. Two more, smaller dogs of similar breed, stood at the ends of chain leashes gripped by a pair of men with weathered, hard faces and two more rough individuals made up the collection.

"Simon Legree take off yore glims!" yelled someone.

Union's gaze settled for a study of the newcomer. He wore black smoked glasses that hid his eyes, his mien was decisive.

"I am sorry, my friends," he said in a harsh, gravelly voice, "but——"

"An' hyah comes Uncle Tom!" shouted a spectator. "It air old Uncle Thomas Jefferson."

From the doorway of Charley Wan's laundry. Thomas Jefferson emerged, looking like a gnarled old black idol, his broad mouth grinning friendly, his gray wool bobbing to his host of friends. In his arms he carried two big paper-wrapped bundles of laundry.

"Ho, folks!" he chortled. "Ah ain't no Uncle Tom, Ah am Uncle Jeff, which Major Shenandoah freed befo' de woah an' which tooken care of him when he was ridin' with Giniral Jeb Stuart, lak you all know. Ho, dawg, you suah am a big dawg! Doan you growl at ole Uncle Jeff which likes dawgs an' chillun. Chillun an' dawgs they foller old Uncle Jeff aroun'."

The great brindled mastiff's hackles rose. It crouched at the end of its chain, its paws digging into the sand, a terrible weight of brute flesh and power. The growling grew and grew. Uncle Thomas Jefferson came on down along the boardwalk toward Union, his back turned to the animal.

"Jeff! Uncle Jeff!" roared Union. "Run fer yore life! The dawg be chargin' you!"

The mastiff leaped, the force of its leap ripped the leash from its master's hand. In plunging menace it came for Uncle Jeff. He caught a vision of it over his shoulder and tore madly for Union, dropping his bundles. A roar burst from the brindled brute as it bounded after him.

"Jump fer the batwings, Uncle Jeff!" howled Union. "Push-'em-Up, shotgun! Mad dawg loose!"

IT WAS too late. As Thomas Jefferson turned for the safety of the swinging doors the mastiff launched itself through the air in a tremendous bound and with paws stretched hit him full between the

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shoulders. He went down, sprawled and helpless with the dog on top of him, its jaws slavering. Fury roared from its chest, it drew its head up and poised for the downward drive that would send its fangs into Uncle Jeff's neck.

In that instant Union acted, his hand swept the empty sack that had carried the dodgers from the planking, he held its mouth wide open and jumped for the dog. Over the mastiff's head plunged the sack shrouding it and blocking the jaws. Union held tight with both hands under its throat. He flung his own body onto that of the dog and wrestled it. Under him the mass of muscle writhed and fought, the dog's roaring came muffled from the sack. To and fro on the planking Union and the mastiff rolled with Union shouting.

"Push-'em-Up, shotgun!"

"I am here and the sawed-off is here, Union," husked Push-'em-Up, standing above the battle. "But I kin not shoot without gitting you."

"Prinz! Down, Prinz, down!"

Union got a glance along the boardwalk. The mustached man with the black glasses, from whose hand the chain leash had been ripped, was advancing fast with the thick bamboo stick tapping out ahead of him as a guide. He reached the combat and his harsh voice repeated its command.

"Down, Prinz, down!"

The great dog went relaxed in Union's grip, he whined. Behind the black-glassed man his companions poured and one of them grabbed the loose steel leash and snapped it around a heavy awning post. Union got up panting. The brindled brute crouched now on its chain and worried the sack off its head. Its body quivered, it became quiet at its master's voice. But its eyes glared insensate fury at Union.

"Mister," said Union hoarsely, "yore animal tried ter kill Uncle Jeff. It also tried ter kill me. We kin have no brute sech as that around this town. Push-'em-Up, give it both barrels."

"Stop!" the black-glassed man raised his hand. "You are taking a blinded Union veteran's eyes away."

"Huh? Blinded Union veteran? So be I a Union veteran."

"At Gettysburg, by a shell explosion."

"So was I ter Gettysburg. Push-'em-Up, dispense with yore artillery. But how, mister—"

"Bartholomew Bardo, West Coast commander of Disabled Union Veterans, on my way to our first national convention in Chicago. Prinz here, imported from Germany, has been trained to guide the sightless. These other two dogs, Lothair and Friedrich, are his get, they, too, are in training. I am collecting funds on the way to provide every blinded Union veteran with a dog of this breed as a guide. They can be bred rapidly, in a few years only the program can be carried out."

"Tough luck, Comrade Bardo," said Union feelingly. "Gettysburg now, that was more nor rugged. Which day did you git yores?"

"The fourth day of the battle. Right after Little Round Top."

"An' there was Comrade Sargint Jones all alone on Littul Round Top," put in Push-'em-Up. "Or so he says continually. Not to promote trade but are you gonna buy your new-found comrade a drink inside, Union?"

"That I shall," said Union heartily. "Thomas Jefferson, you git along with the Major's wash. Comrade Bardo, lemme aid you. Lemme take wore arm. Gimme yore stick, you will not need it."

Bardo made a motion that would have swept the oversize bamboo cane out of Union's reach but Union already had it. His whole arm sagged under its weight, his jaw dropped.

"Good gorry mighty!" he gasped. "This be a deadly weppin, Comrade Bardo. It has got a solid steel rod inside a bamboo skin."

"There are people who take advantage of a handicapped man, Comrade Jones," grated Bardo. "With Prinz and this stick I can defend myself. A drink? Thank you."

II

UNION'S brow was knotted as he guided the black-glassed Bardo through the batwings and up to the bar. Bardo's four companions, hitching Lothair and Friedrich to awning posts, followed them.

Union steered Bardo to a round table next the plateglass window and two of the men trailed along, and sat down. One of

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them was tall and cadaverous, the other stocky and scowling and on his forearm under his rolled-up sleeve showed an eagle in tattoo.

"Ah, you be a seafarin' man," said Union.

"That is Miller, once in the Union Navy," said Bardo. The stocky man scowled even more blackly and instantly rolled down his sleeves. From outside in the street the sound of a tremendous hammering began on the platform. It swarmed now with workers nailing black tarpaulins over the framework.

"What is that, Comrade Jones?" inquired Bardo, turning his head toward the racket.

"That be the honest workmen which after two hours fer lunch, redeye an' roulette are now back ter work. They are fixin' the scenery on the stage fer termorrer's great centennial pageant, which I writ an' be the star of. This here Jezebel, the dustiest, scorchinest, cockroachinest most magnificent boomtown in Arizony was founded by a single stroke o' the pick which hit free silver an' I shall re-enact the scene as the Foundin' Father. You see that chute, Comrade Bardo—excuse me." Union coughed embarrassedly. "There be a chute leadin' down from the tarpaulin mountain which has a treasure bin built above it. I smite the rock with the pick, the bin's trap opens and down the chute runs eighty thousand bucks worth o' twenty dollar gold pieces, loaned by the bank and the saloons an' gamblin' palaces fer the show. It was silver which the Foundin' Father hit but they ain't no spinal thrills in seein' a river o' common cartwheels a flowin'. Cartwheels be small pertaters around here so I made it gold."

"Eighty thousand dollars worth of gold pieces flowing down a chute? A fortune, Comrade Jones." The heavy cheeks twitched, the mouth clamped like a trap, the blind man's nostrils distended.

"Why, the street will be paved with gold pieces, rolling around loose."

"It will not," snorted Union. "Not with Dewberry Beanpole Stebbins, the Connecticut-spawned, flint-hearted cashier o' the Bank of Jezebel handlin' the yaller boys, it won't. He will be in a high-sided wagin with a lot o' small sacks which will be held mouth open under the chute. Every one o' them gold pieces will plunk outer the chute inter a sack an' be stacked up in the wagin which will gallop promptly back ter the bank with its armed guards. Inter the strongroom all the little sacks will go an' the gold pieces owners will call fer 'em. No, sir, every precaution has bin took ter protect that flood o' yaller boys. They won't be a gun on nobody but Sheriff Lew Barton on the stage, they will all be three miles outer town."

"Three miles out of town?"

"That be the prodijious treasure rush I thought up," said Union modestly. "Five hundred o' the fust settlers, cowboys, miners and so forth will be lined up in wagins an' on horseback out there on the burnin' desert. When the Foundin' Father, which is me, hits the strike, o' gold, up go rockets and a lotta Roman candles from Pale an' Wan, our Chinese colony, who will be hid in the treasure bin, fer a signal. An' then hell-hootin' the mob will pile in from the desert, re-enactin' the great treasure rush scene, reelin' in their seats an' saddles an' firin' a fusillade inter empty air.

"Yessir, I have seed to it that all Jezebel's fire-irons will be out thar on the sands, I do not allow any tomatoes, old eggs or loaded weapons in any audience before which I appear in pusson. Oh, them gold pieces are safe, like I said, they won't be five minnits between the stage an' the bank strongroom."

"And on the platform, beside yourself and I think the sheriff?"

"Miss Sadie Hostetter, representin' the Spirit o' Jezebel, who will recite the openin' ode; Mister Donald Donaldson o' the mission fer whose benefit be the pageant, and an honorary committee o' local dignitaries, merchants, mine officials, an' pawnbrokers too fat or lazy ter risk their bottoms in the treasure rush. After the treasure rush the Prophet Jimberjaw will close the bill in place o' the customary acrobats or Swiss bell ringers."

"So the whole town of Jezebel will be present?"

"It most suttinly will."

Bardo's forehead rutted. "Comrade Jones, a favor. Would you permit me to sit on the platform and after the program is finished to address the audience in a plea for the Disabled Union Veterans? As I

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told you, I solicit free-will subscriptions in the towns I pass through."

"Why yes, Comrade Bardo," said Union. "You kin deliver yore plea an' pass the hat. This be a most free-spendin' town in any worthy cause. I should not be surprised if you could collect a thousand bucks."

"That would buy and train plenty of my dogs to aid the disabled."

UNION stared through the plate glass. Yards only from him the great mastiff Prinz crouched at the awning post, licking his fangs, glaring balefully as though keeping a vigil of hate. The other dogs crouched quiescent but menacing.

"I do not approve of yore dogs," said Union. "Yore sire, Prinz, he looks ter me not like trained ter guide but trained ter catch colored men. An' Germany, where he come from, ain't never had no emancipation problem I kin reckerlect."

"German East Africa he was born in," said Bardo quickly. "There are native hostiles there. Prinz must have served as a watchdog at some remote station or farm. He probably has been trained to fight black tribesmen."

"That could be it, Comrade Bardo. An' now, leave us whistle up the bartender an' compare our various experiences at Gettysburg where you got yore bad luck." His brows rose as his gaze fell on the breast of Bardo's blue tunic. On the shoulder was a slash that had been carefully darned and on the left breast was a darned hole. "That uniform. How long have you had that one?"

"It is the one I was wounded in at Gettysburg. I have kept it carefully in camphor and took it out for this trip."

"Creased by a bullit on the shoulder," gurgled Union, "but how come a bullit hole over yore heart, an' you be still here?"

Bardo bent his head reverently. "A miracle, Comrade Jones. The bullet struck a small Bible and did not penetrate but became imbedded in its pages."

"That be indeed a miracle," said Union. "The secind day o' Gettysbury a wuthless feller sargint which had won my hull next month's pay offen me at poker was hit over the heart by a bullit, jest like you, but it was his deck o' cards in his breast pocket which saved his life an' cost me twenty dollars I had ter pay up. They was plenty o' miracles at Gettysburg. Let us drink ter the miracles."

"Thank you, no more." The black-glassed Bardo rose. "I have had too long a trip on that freighter. I am tired. We still have to find lodgings for ourselves and the dogs. Miller and Glenn, untie them."

THE scowling Miller guided him for the batwings and Union joined them on the boardwalk. The dogs were untethered and stood by Miller and the cadaverous Glenn. Swirling along Silver Street came the dust cloud, whipped by a sudden gusty desert breeze and men ducked and coughed everywhere. Union tore out a red bandana and buried his nose in it.

"No wuss nor the Sahara desert, Comrade Bardo," he offered. "It be good fer the thirst."

The powdered alkali settled. Bardo's dark glasses were a mass of dust, his cheeks were caked with it, tears already ran from his sightless eyes behind the lenses.

"You got the wust of it," said Union. From Bardo's nose the glasses were slipping as coughing racked his lungs. "Look out, yore glasses, lemme wipe 'em."

He caught the falling lenses and polished them. Bardo was wiping his sightless eyes with his own handkerchief. Union extended his hand to put the glasses back, then started. Bardo's eyes were stonily set and fixed, but they were strange eyes. One was green, the other a steely blue. Bardo reached up as Union put the glasses on his nose and adjusted them over his eyes.

"Thank you Comrade Jones," he grated.

"I do not wish ter be pussonal, Comrade Bardo," said Union. "But kin you see at all?"

"Lights and shadows only. I can tell day from night. Goodbye, Comrade Jones, I shall see you later."

Miller thrust Prinz's leash into his hand. Prinz snarled, swinging his head toward Union, teeth bared, then tugged in his collar. Tapping with his loaded bamboo stick Bardo went along the boardwalk, his feet uncertain but his back stiffly braced. Union saw that back, in the blue cloth of the uniform directly under the left shoulder-blade he saw the second darned hole.

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He began to mop his forehead vigorously with his bandana.

"More miracles! Too damn many miracles. A man with one green eye an' one blue eye an' a hole in back o' his tunic right behind the heart where the bullit which went through his heart, not stopped by no Bible, come out. Thar be highly suspicious thoughts a-bornin' in my brilliant noospaperman's brain."

He stopped muttering. Another muttering had commenced along Silver Street. There were jovial outcries.

"Howdy, Carmelita! Howdy, senorita! Goin' to work early, ain't yuh?"

"Stop an' talk ter us, Carmelita."

RAVEN-TRESSED head high, lovely face aglow, eyes flashing, a lissome Mexican girl was parading down the boardwalk. She wore a bright green, low-cut blouse, an orange skirt and scarlet silk stockings clad her shapely legs. She was color and Latin beauty personified. Everyone she passed along Silver Street usually smiled at Carmelita and called to her on her way to the Crystal Chandelier where she sang. Over her shoulder on a ribbon hung her guitar.

She came toward Union, vision of her for an instant blocked by Bardo and his gigantic dog. Bardo stood aside, his head switched and his dark glasses focussed on the graceful, limbs that flashed past him. One hand went instinctively to his sweeping mustaches and twitched an end gallantly. His lips opened in a smile.

"Ah, Senor Jones," Carmelita hailed him as she went by, "the good eveneen' to you."

"An' ter you, Carmelita," gagged Union, his face working strangely. "You sure be a sight fer sore eyes. Sore eyes?" He jerked erect. "You have restored a gent's lost vision. Good gorrymighty, this calls fer a drink!"

He hurtled through the batwings and up to the bar, empty for the moment of all but Push-'em-Up and a swarthy, broken-nosed Mexican glowering in the angle next the window. Dust-stained and travel-worn, he was not a pretty picture of a worthwhile newcomer, but Jezebel had seen his like too often to even notice them.

"Push-'em-Up," gasped Union. "Double shot. I have noos, private noos. Gimme yore secrit ear." He motioned toward the Mexican, well within hearing.

"Let him pass," said Push-'em-Up coming over. "He has sputtered out he savvies no Engleesh. When I ast him had he had a hard ride up outer Mexico he went off like a strink o' firecrackers an' my Spanish is feeble. Personally Senor Flatnose looks like he was on the dodge to me. Spit out your news in our mother tongue, Union, and fear not anyone dropping off the eaves."

"Another miracle in Jezebel!" said Union hoarsely. "Carmelita she has wrought it. When she got closet ter that blind Bartholomew Bardo on the boardwalk he stood aside ter let her pass, he swivelled his neck an' he glued his black glasses ter her legs, which they are the best west o' the Mississippi. Then he twirled his mustache like a blasted dude masher an' put on a killin' smile an' did everythin' but let a wolf call emanate from his mouth. Carmelita's underpinnin's have restored the sight of a blind man. Heck, Push-'em-Up, he ain't no more blind than I be."

"You ain't so far-seeing at times, Union," remarked Push-'em-Up. "I have seen you bunk inter plenty awning stanchions after a quart of Old Merry Panther Screech."

"He be up ter no good, that Comrade Bardo. He be a bogus collector o' free-will gifts fer the Disabled Unioneers be my suspicion. An' so I be goin' ter spend some money ter find out if it be so. After nine o'clock at night the Transcontinental Tellygraph has a special rate an' I be gonna wire the Commander o' the San Francisco Post o' the GAR an' ask what he knows about this hombre."

THE double shot of Old Merry Panther Screech whisked into his beard. "Warrh, Gloof! If Comrade Bardo be a bogus I have saved my feller citizens o' Jezebel a hunk o' money by keepin' it outer his fraudulent pockits. There will be no plea from the platform tomorrer after the pageant."

"Union," said Push-'em-Up shaking his head sadly. "You come, I fear from an overly cautious Massachusetts family where even the little ones suspect each other's motives and accuse each other of holding

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out the Sunday School penny. Is this a thought to harbor of a disabled comrade? Suppose he does acquire funds by reciting his wounds at Gettysburg?"

"He said he got 'em on the fourth day, Gettysburg it lasted three. I oughter know, I fit fer three days an' on the fourth!"

"You had reached Syracuse on your way to the Canadian Border. You did not tarry for the fourth day at Gettysburg. Also, Union, referring to unscrupulous use of the Battle of Gettysburg—how many free drinks have you acquired with your tale of 'All alone on Little Round Top,' and how many IOU's have you issued on the strength of it? Personally, I fear that you are endeavoring to eliminate a possible competitor. You are not such a cause for sympathy as your rival with his physical disability. Gettysburg merely rendered you mentally unsound."

"You close yore trap!" roared Union. "I shall wire the GAR commander, much as it may cost me money."

"And who is he? Some old companion of battlefield and bar?"

"How in heck would I know who he be or whar the GAR Post should be addressed? I shall wire him care o' the Chief o' Police which be used ter locatin' people an' tomorrer mornin' I shall have my reply. If Comrade Leg-Leerer Bardo be okay, I will do nuthin' about it, if he an' his dogs be a fraud, I shall have him poked outer Jezebel by Sheriff Lew. Thet sailor in the Union Navy with the scowlin' square face an' the eagle tattoo fer another thought—it was not a red-white-an-blue eagle, it was a black eagle which is the German Imperial Navy."

"Union," suggested Push-'em-Up, "you are getting yoreself all worked up into a most acid condition. Lookit now, I think only the kindest thoughts of my fellermen and—hey, where in hell d'you think you are going? Come back, you, you owe me two bucks for tequila!"

The batwings were swinging behind the figure that had quietly but rapidly departed under cover of Union's roaring. No broken-nosed Mexican remained in the angle of the bar.

Sadly Push-'em-Up dropped the beer maul which he had gripped.

"Union," he said, "perhaps all humankind is not honest. In fact, there are times when as part owner of this bucket of blood and hence familiar with the peccadilloes of bartenders, I search myself before allowing myself to leave the premises."

III

THE hand press slammed down and Union lifted it for the last time, standing back and mopping a bedewed brow. Beside him a tall stack of printed tickets rose, in the low-roofed printing plant of the *Courier* the air was bakingly hot and only a vagrant breeze drifted through the open windows that gave onto desert sand beyond.

"They sure be sellin' like hot cakes, these tickets," he proclaimed proudly to Thomas Jefferson who sat on the edge of a box against the wall, a double-barrelled shotgun between his legs. "Now, when Pluto comes back from his distribution an' his secrit mission—"

"Heah am young Pluto," grinned Uncle Jeff. Through the door that led into the front office sauntered Plutarco Herrera, a small brown cigarro in the corner of his mouth. He exhaled a cloud of smoke negligently.

"Behold, Senor Jones, my more than father, I have perform your command. The teekets all distribute'."

"Here be more tickits fer you ter sell fer fifty cents, reduced from a cartwheel, amidst the crowd at the last minute, termorrer," said Union. "Reduce 'em ter two bits if you have ter jest before I make my grand entrance as the Foundin' Father. Should you find any worthy citizens which got drunk an' slept through the show without realizin' it sell 'em to 'em fer a dime. Go home ter bed and git ready ter rise bright an' shinin' an' early fer the pageant."

"Arise early and bright and shining for the so-magnificent pageant, Senor Jones? Look you, all Mexican Alley already quaffs itself into fiesta mood. I go to quaff myself and dance the fandañgo with the antelope-eyed señoritas in the spangled skirts and the scarlet stockings. *Carramba,* what a night portends for Jezebel."

UNION'S face twitched in mental anguish. "Stay up all night drinkin' an'

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dancin', smokin' an' swearin'. Be this the manner in which I brung you up as an orphant, an' pay you seven dollars a week wages, you little hellion? Only terday I give you a hull dollar in advance, which no doubt you have squandered."

"Wheech, behold!" Pluto drew a roll of greenbacks out of his pocket. "I place your most munificent advance dollar upon the dice table een Mexican Alley, eet become the twenty-seex dollair een no time."

"Gamblin' too?" howled Union. "Wasting away the precious hours o' youth hanging with yore tongue out over a layout? An' I suppose you fergot yore other mission which I give you, the secrit mission?"

"Your secret meesion of locateeng the Bartholomew Bardo I have perform' een my spare time," announced Pluto. "He and hees *compadres* they hole up een rooms een Mexican Alley and the mastiffs they are chain een a shack out back. Only the two smaller hounds of hell they feed, the beeg one he ees left to raven een hungair, lashed to a great post. *Dios,* what furee, what bared fangs! I have crept out the back of the Alley and regard heem."

"That am whut Ah tole you, Mistuh Union," said Thomas Jefferson. "That am a man-eatin' dawg an' if you do not feed him he will go mad. He has got a heart which am full of hate an' he hated you because you fought him down. Me, Ah am not gwine to let my shotgun out of mah hand while that hell hound am in town."

"Fergit the bow-wow," said Union. "Pluto, you kin git on yore nefarious ways. Uncle Jeff, will you kindly step inter the front offis an' bring me a sheet o' copy paper an' the pencil stub you will find in the cash drawer, which I keep thar ter make out my IOU's fer whatever small sums the till holds. I am writin' out my San Francisco tellygram inquirin' about a man an' his dawg an' takin' it down myself ter Speed Murphy."

Uncle Jeff shambled off, shotgun still in hand, and Union stepped out from behind the hand press into the center of the floor.

"A little breath o' fresh air will cool the fevered brain," he rumbled. "It be all whirlin' about with Bardo an' bow-wow an'—good gorry mighty here come the dawg!"

It came. One instant the window was an empty gap, giving onto moonlit sand, the next the racing shadow swept from sand and was soaring through it in a tremendous leap. Yellow beast eyes flared, the jaws were wide apart, the great body flew through space, driven by the powerful legs. The mastiff that had hurtled through the window was in mid-career, driving for the kill, straight for Union's throat. Union dropped on hands and knees in a split second, the brindled shape passed over him, struck on its paws on the plank floor, met the wall in its unchecked rush and went up it in a bound, twisted its body in air, struck the floor and leaped again. Union flung one arm across his throat and rolled.

"The dawg!" he roared, desperately. "Uncle Jeff, the dawg!"

Something else roared. Flame lanced, a gush of acrid black powder smoke billowed under the low roof, the crash of shots reverberated thunderously, the air hissed with metal. Down onto Union's rolling body plunged the weight of the beast, but it was dead weight, there was no life in it. The leaping drive had finished, Union rolled again and got to his feet gasping.

"Gawd, Uncle Jeff, you got him in mid-air!"

The mastiff gave its last twitches, its head a bloody ruin where both loads of buckshot had hit and torn. A dull crimson pool spread on the floor. Uncle Jeff still stood in the doorway leading to the front office. He broke his double-barrelled shotgun, picked out its brass shells and shoved two more loads in.

"Yassuh, Mistuh Union, I got dat hell hound. But they am two more of them."

Union's gaze veered to the window. Only empty sand stretched beyond it. He looked down at the dog's body.

"Starved inter a ravin' fury, huh? Jest how did he git this far I wonder?" He lifted his head, a shrill sound was drifting into the printing plant from somewhere close by. It rose again and again.

"Whistle, Mistuh Union," said Thomas Jefferson. "Whistle callin' fer dead dawg. Mebbe the other live dawgs am comin' now."

"Whistle callin' fer dawg calls fer Winchester." Union crossed to the wall and took the rifle down, slung it over his shoulder. "We shall greet the newcomers,

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Uncle Jeff, an' mebbe lead shall whistle also. Outside, where the sightin' be good."

They went through the front office and onto the boardwalk. The whistle sounded even closer, hardly thirty yards away the trio of men were approaching. Bartholomew Bardo was in the center, tapping his way along with his bamboo stick and blowing blasts from a small whistle, Miller on one side of him, the cadaverous Glenn on the other. Each with a tugging mastiff on leash.

"Prinz, Prinz, where are you? Here, boy, Prinz, here!" called Bardo, lowering his whistle. Union stood stolidly until the trio reached him. At his side Thomas Jefferson had his shotgun at his hip, his gnarled face like carven ebony, his poise that of some ancient tribal fighting chief.

"Well, Comrade Bardo," said Union, "you now have arrived at the *Courier* offis. You be callin' yore dawg, I gather."

"Prinz has broken his chain and escaped, Comrade Jones. We have been in search of him for the last half hour."

"Cease ter search," said Union. "Yore dawg be as dead as a goat."

"Prinz dead?"

"He leapt upon me through the winder an' Uncle Jeff here he transferred him inter dawg's heaven with both barrels. Yore damn dawg tried ter kill me, he got killed himself. Kindly explain."

"Prinz tried to kill you, Comrade Jones? He broke loose from his stanchion unexpectedly, I can gather what has happened He is of a breed that never forgets an opponent, you wrestled him into defeat, he bore a rage against you that filled his animal mind. All he had to do was to reach the Arizona Palace and pick up your scent from there, he has a nose that is practically supernatural. He had the scent of your body from your physical combat, he could take it off your boot-tracks all the way to this office. So Prinz is dead and my eyes are gone."

"You still got two more dawgs, Comrade Bardo."

"An' Ah have got two moah barrels," said Thomas Jefferson.

"They are not so well trained as Prinz, Comrade Jones. But there is nothing I can say, Prinz was killed in self-defense."

"Send yore friends in ter cart him out an' bury him back o' the printin' plant," said Union. "Me, I have got an engagement. Comrade Bardo, I suggest you meet me at the Arizony Palace just before the show starts tomorrow an' I shall escort you ter the platform. A final permission be necessary."

"You are kind, Comrade Jones. Let us go in, Miller and Glenn." The two younger mastiffs tugged at their chains, the group disappeared in the *Courier*. Thomas Jefferson stroked the barrels of his shotgun, old eyes wise.

"Broke away, did that man-eatin' hell hound, from a stanchion? That dawg never broke away from no stanchion, Mistuh Jones, or he would of had a piece of chain hangin' ter his collar or else his collar would of bin broke off. That dawg was loosed for a runnin' jump from the sand outside the winder or Ah am an ole fool. And them two which am left are jest as mean. Lisun to that!"

Savagely the ululations rose from inside the *Courier* building, the animal fury in them was terrific.

"Prinz's get am smellin' the blood of their sire, Mistuh Jones. Now they will go mad and kill, yessuh. Bettuh unsling yore Winchestuh."

"Ter hell with the bow-wows," vouchsafed Union stoutly. "Leave us git our boots movin' fer the wire offis."

THEY went along the boardwalk, deserted for a couple of blocks of shuttered business buildings, shouldered through the night's crowd that was pouring in and out of the batwings of lighted saloons and reached the Transcontinental Telegraph structure. At its table by the key hunched "Speed" Murphy, gaunt and stoop-shouldered, meditatively chewing on a quill toothpick, his instrument silent.

"Speed, I have come ter git off a prodijiously important night letter at yore lowest possible rate," announced Union.

"Well, well, well," grinned Speed "Sit down and indite same. I can tell by your worried expression how it will start our 'Wire me a hundred bucks immediately. Am in dire need'."

"It be direr nor that," snorted Union. "I figger it will kick a rank impostor clean offen our pageant platform an' outer town. Here she comes."

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He wrote rapidly on the blank, shoving it over the table.

"I have been damn near assassinated by this old comrade-in-arms about whom I be inquirin', Speed. Or so I suspicion but this will fix him if he be a bogus. If I kin not find out nuthin' about him I will have ter give him the benefit o' the doubt an' let him go his way, felonious or righteous as the case may be. He claims ter be a disabled Union veteran which fit at Gettysburg but I have cause ter disbelieve his story."

"So do you claim to have been at Gettysburg," remarked Speed Murphy. "All alone there, in fact. But there are a great many people in Jezebel who are prone to believe that you passed the war playing checkers in some comfortable New England firehouse. Okay, Union, I shall send your screed, it is the first bit of business I have had since night fell."

He reached for the key and expertly, with incredible rapidity began to tap. The instrument rattled the opening words.

To Commander San Francisco Post
Grand Army of the Republic
Care of Chief of Police
San Francisco, California

"There she goes," said Speed. "Paradise is catching and relaying on the main trunk line. A pretty penny this will cost you, Union, you have indited half a volume and asked for a rush, rush answer prepaid."

"Let her go, Speed," said Union hoarsely. "It hurts, but let her go. I kin charge it somehow ter the *Courier*."

"She's going." The key rattled on, then stopped abruptly. Silence hung heavy in the telegraph building. Speed worked away, no clicking came, he sat back.

"It got as far as 'Hombre in town here with one green, one blue eye and three suspicious Tom show bloodhounds claiming to be'—and then the wire went dead. It's dead, all right, Union, it's real trouble, a bad break between here and Paradise, maybe those damn Indians again. Lafe Stump, my linesman is on a five-day leave in Tuscon, so it looks like we're out at least the rest of the week."

He slapped Union's message on the spindle.

"Undeliverable, Union."

IV

"BRING on the show!"

"What air we waitin' on!"

Roaring impatience swept Silver Street where milling citizens and their wives jammed the artery from sidewalk to sidewalk in front of the stage, while the awnings burgeoned with Jezebel's small fry. The shouts came thunderously in over the batwings of the Arizona Palace where Union Jones leaned importantly against the bar, clad in a bright red flannel prospector's shirt with sparkling new blue jeans crammed into high boots. He was downing his fourth double shot of Old Merry Panther Screech.

"Poke up the pageant! We ain't got another hundred years ter wait!"

"Gloof!" remarked Union, as the last of the double shot whisked stomachward. "That be my loyal public clamorin' fer my appearance. Make 'em laugh, make 'em cry, make 'em wait be the true secrit o' theatrical success. Lissen ter them simmer."

Through the plateglass window the crowd loomed, miners, townsmen, cowboys in a waiting mass before the transformed platform. Now black tarpaulin covered the framework, presenting a solid wall for a background and various outcroppings in front of it. Cactus plants transferred to tubs provided a desert atmosphere, a sign proclaimed "Treasure Mountain," leading to the conclusion that a mountain was represented. Near the top of the rear tarpaulin gleamed a square of tinfoil, neatly nailed onto what looked like a trap door, and the high-boarded chute led directly down from it to end above a wagon. On the wagon seat perched two brawny guards with rifles, the elongated figure of Dewberry Beanpole Stebbins, cashier of the Bank of Jezebel appeared behind them with several helpers.

"You keep 'em simmering much longer, Union, they will boil over," counseled Push-'em-Up. "You kin tamper just long enough with the citizenry of Jezebel after which it blows up. I would suggest you git the show going."

"I be the hull show," said Union. "I

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be merely promotin' myself inter the proper mood like any old Shakespearean actor, which I was at the Rialto Theayter on Fourteenth Street an' Broadway, when I was Horace Greeley's best printer on the New York *Tribune*, an' got a night off. I was the best foreman o' the spear-carryin' supers the Rialto ever had an' also I understudied fer King O'Leary. Make 'em laugh, make 'em cry, make 'em wait, I say agin'."

"They are crying all right, Union. They are crying for your blood."

"Bring out Union Jones! Hang Union Jones!" bellowed a citizen, pressing a large and bulbous nose against the plateglass. "Here we sweat an' wait, an' he lolls inside drinkin'."

"Git out, potato nose!" bellowed Union. "This saloon be the wings o' the pageant stage where I be a-waitin' my cue."

Through the rear door of the Arizona Palace tottered a cowboy on high-heeled long-spurred boots, his face alkali-stained.

"Union," he howled from ten yards away, "yuh kin not hold the treasure rush out on that desert no longer. Five hundred hombres with hosses and wagins a-waitin' an' the likker give out half an hour ago an' still no rocket to start to own on. Major Shenandoah he dispatched me hell-for-leather to tell you to git goin'."

"Okay, okay," rumbled Union. "Leave us gather the cast in the wings which consists o' me an' the Prophet Jimberjaw. In the meantime I shall calm the multitude." More yelling and howling was surging from the street. Union advanced to the batwings and shoved his blazing red face over them. "Lissen, you!" he roared. "You wait a few minutes I shall show you the damndest Foundin' Father o' Jezebel you ever saw."

"You had better!"

"If yuh don't we shall have Simon Legree sick his dawgs on yuh," called the bulbous-nosed citizen, removing his beak from the plateglass. "Here he is."

At the foot of the gangplank leading from the Arizona Palace's porch to the stage Bartholomew Bardo appeared, tapping his bamboo stick ahead of him, with the dogs Lothair and Friedrich on the leashes he held in his other hand. Expertly they led him up the gangway while Union gulped.

"Hey, Comrade Bardo!" The cry choked off. "Push-'em-Up, he has not waited fer no final permission from me ter sit on the stage. Now I kin not put him offen it. Instid o' lookin' at me with undisguised admiration the audience will be starin' at that gorryblasted animal act. The most badly shaved French poodles kin distract attention from King O'Leary himself if they git on the stage at the same time with him an' those are no French poodles. Yes, I had better git goin' but where is the Prophet?"

"Behold, Union Jones, I come!" From the back of the saloon a strange figure was advancing. A burlap bag with holes cut in it for head and arms served as upper garment, the trousers were tattered, but the old flame that Jezebel knew burned in the eyes of the Prophet Jimberjaw, Jezebel's leading eccentric. Long, lank hair flowed to his shoulders, his oversize mooselike jaw was cleanly shaven. In one hand he brandished a vast mass of paper sheets.

"Here is it writ! The visions which I have had of Jezebel. For days and nights I have been setting them down and I have just completed the last words of my small screed."

"Small screed?" howled Union. "How long d'you want fer yore prophecy?"

"A mere hour, perchance two," orated the Prophet. "Lo, I not only repeat my prophecy that Los Angeles will become a city ten miles square but I foresee that a new and strange rush for gold will descend upon Jezebel long after we are gone. The discontented spouses of the Babylon of New York will seek the climate of Jezebel, Arizona, in their silk stockings and their low-cut gowns and while the riders of the range croon enchanted ballads into their ears, they will have the tiresome shackles of matrimony severed from the wealthy mates they have left behind. Yea, the new gold rush, the new diggers of gold will arrive in Jezebel, flying on the wings of angels in the air!"

"Gold diggin' wimmen, instid o' gold-diggin' men!" yowled Union. "Jezebel, Arizony, turned inter a nest of illicit love! Divorce mills instid o' stamp mills fer the local industry! Prophet, you go too far!"

"And also I foresee the humble $30 a month and found rider of the range wedded to many of these seraphic handmaidens of Babylon, abandoning the flea-ridden blanket for the silken sheets, the tin wash-

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basin of the bunkhouse bench for the outdoor water pool of tile."

"Prophet! Cowpokes marryin' inter silk sheets an' swimmin' pools!"

"Hang Union Jones!" The clamor outside was becoming indescribable.

"You stay here, Prophet," said Union hoarsely. "I shall give you yore cue after the big treasure rush. I kin no longer hold my loyal public." He moved again to the batwings and yelled. "Open up the show! Start her off, Sadie!"

From her seat on the stage Miss Sadie Hostetter, aged sixteen, a remarkably pert and well-built young lady in a long white gown and homemade golden halo, and gripping a staff with a gilt star at its top, tripped to the front of the stage. She wiggled attractively, stilled her glamorously-formed hips and got ready to recite.

"Lissen," said Union proudly. "I writ that piece fer her."

Miss Sadie Hostetter began to speak.

I am the Spirit of Jezebel,
A town full of prosperity and general hell.
With clean, wholesome fun and treasure it gleams,
And on Saturday night it bursts out at the seams.

She paused, blinking a bit, and grasping for the next verse. "Ah-er—"

"Sadie has fergit her speech," roared a spectator. "Never mind the po'try, Spirit o' Jezebel, wiggle some more fer us!"

Miss Sadie Hostetter smiled pleasedly and began an undulant motion.

"Spirit o' Jezebel, you quit!" bellowed Union. "Fer shame, Sadie Hostetter! Dispense with yore poem, I be comin' on."

He plunged through the batwings, pick on shoulder and up the gangway. He passed the row of chairs that held the local dignitaries, reeled a trifle and reached the center of the stage. In resonant tones he commenced:

Here come I, the Foundin' Father,
Outer beans an' nigh outer water;
Weary o' limb from a heck of a hike,
Lookin' ter find a treasure strike.

He paused impressively, shaded his brow with one hand and scouted the scenery. He lifted the canteen to his lips and drew a long draught, "The last o' the water," he groaned dramatically. "Arrgh—warrgh!" A spasm of coughing hit him and his eyes bulged. "Delicious, life-givin' water! I can stagger a few feet on my weary way."

He moved forward, tacked and bumped against the mountain wall which shuddered violently.

"The Foundin' Father he air foundered like I said he would," clamored an experienced critic. "He air goin' down in full view."

Union jerked himself erect and glared at his audience. He stepped back and once more explored the scenery.

"Thar be gold in them thar hills!" he orated. "Fer fifteen toilsome years, sincet I left that Jezebel of a woman I married in Ioway, I have bin a trackin' o' you, treasure! Come out from behind them bushes, treasure! Ah, I have seed you!"

He pointed toward the tin foil covered trap door, lurched up the steps that led to it and poised with pick uplifted over the wooden barrier that gave onto the chute. Once more he reverted to heroic verse.

An' with this smite we'll all be showed
A rumblin', tumblin' lucky lode.

Wham! The pick struck full on the trap door and Union stood proudly aside. He voiced more inspiring lines:

I christen thee Jezebel
In memory o' the wife I departed from so well.

"Now, inmates o' Jezebel, watch her gush!"

Nothing happened, nothing gushed. The tin foiled door remained immovable. From behind the tarpaulin mountain wall an Oriental voice squeaked:

"Tlapdoor stuckee. No gusheee. Holdee your pantsee! Smitee again, Union Jonesee! Yell like hellee!"

"Pale an' Wan!" vociferated Union. "You git that thing open!" Once more he swung up his pick and sent it thudding into the door. "Open up there, an' gush! Open in the name o' the Continental Congress!"

"That doee!" carolled the hidden Pale

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and Wan delightedly. "Here come gushee!"

THE trap door opened and from it in an incredible stream jumped, jounced and leaped the mass of golden eagles, rushing down the chute in their hundreds. They clanked, they clattered richly, they jingled and jangled as they crowded against each other. In mad triumph the voices of the crowd merged into one.

"Gold, gold, a river o' gold has come ter Jezzebyell!"

"Keep on smitin', Foundered Father!"

Pride expanded Union's chest. He shook the canteen and it gurgled liquorously and attractively. Pick in one hand, canteen in the other, he made a splendid representation of a miner victorious at the end of his rainbow. His bellow tore the desert air.

An' now I done the job, I think
The Foundin' Father needs a drink.

"Hooray fer Union Jones, the Foundered Father! Founder away, Union!"

"Lookit th' gold roll!"

Down the chute the last of the auriferous stream was passing, falling out of its mouth into the mouths of the small sacks that Dewberry Stebbins and his helpers held ready. Drawstrings were being briskly pulled to, sack after bulging sack of currency thudded on the floor of the guarded wagon.

"Rocket, Pale an' Wan!" yelled Union. "Let her go! Now watch fer the treasure rush from the desert!"

No rocket soared. Once more Pale and Wan cackled shrilly. "Forgottee matchees!"

"Oh, good gorry mighty! Never agin shall I employ a heathen Chinee fer a stage manager. Pale an' Wan, you pass down a couple o' them Roman candles an' here be matches."

He jerked a brass cartridge shell match-case from his pocket, drew out a few and handed the case over to Pale and Wan, whose grinning wrinkled features and clutching hand appeared over the top of the stage mountain. He produced a cigar from the pocket of his shirt, lit it and puffed.

Whoosh! From its stand behind the wall the first rocket went screaming upward into the blue amid a din of applause. A second followed it and a third. In coruscating splendor the rockets burst and spread their balls of fire. From far out on the desert another kind of din answered, the distant shots of a fusillade.

"Here comes the rush, feller inmates of Jezebel!" proclaimed Union.

"Woe, woe, unto Jezebel!" The Prophet Jimberjaw had projected himself from the wings of the Arizona Palace into the spotlight of its porch, brandishing his huge manuscript and looking exultantly direful. "At the final trump, I have had the ultimate vision. A vision of gunfire and doom and sands running red above the dripping jaws of the hounds of hell! So now, oh Jezebel—"

"So now, where is Sheriff Lew?" A tall rider with a star on his vest pulled down a lathered horse directly in front of the stage.

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He had come in unnoticed at the back of the platform and mar and mount bore every evidence of terrifically fast travel. "I am Sheriff Sam Blake of Paradise, lookin' for Sheriff Lew Barton on urgent business."

"Howdy there, Sam," said Sheriff Lew, veteran of Abilene and Dodge, from his seat on the stage. "You musta got alkali in yore eyes not to see me before."

"Oh, there you are, Lew," said the Paradise lawman. "I have come as fast as I could travel after I had a look-see at a cut-off telegram the rest of which has been held up by the broken wire. It says you got a hombre with one blue eye and one green eye here in Jezebel with three big dawgs and is he wanted bad? He is a killer who—"

"Thar he is!" The bellow tore from Union, crashing into the sudden tension that had gripped the street. "Comrade Bardo! Back o' them smoked glims he has got a blue eye an' a green one an' he has got two o' the dawgs in his hand right now. Cover Comrade Bardo!"

The warning came too late. Comrade Bardo was on his feet, his steel-loaded bamboo stick lashed out and took the Paradise sheriff, seated in his saddle at the platform's edge, on top of the head. The thud was ghastly, the lawman pitched limply out of leather into the sand. Bardo whirled and his weapon crashed onto the wrist of Sheriff Lew as he reached for his gun. Sheriff Lew's arm dangled, paralyzed, and Bardo ripped the sixgun from his holster. A whistle leaped to his lips. It shrilled as he pointed his stick.

"Lothair! Friedrich! Charge!"

From their crouching position on the stage, steel chains flung aside, the pair of young mastiffs leaped in trained fury at their targets. They struck in full at the throats of the two armed guards standing on the wagon seat and the impact of their assault flung them overside. From the ranks of the crowd Miller and Glenn leaped forward and stripped the stunned men of their arms. Bardo's other two companions, malign and competent, pressed forward out of the crowd as it wavered back, Colts showing.

In the wagon bed the mastiffs crouched snarling, their prey knocked out. Cashier Beanpole Stebbins dove wildly over the board siding and his helpers followed him as Miller, Glenn and the two other desperadoes swarmed up over the wheels, weapons pointed. Bardo tore off his smoked glasses and flung them into the crowd, he threw back the skirt of his tunic, exposing a second gun tucked into his waistband. He turned and stared at Union and the stare of the mismatched eyes was murderous.

"Yes, I am wanted. And so are the rest of us. How can a man with eyes like mine hide them except under a blind man's glasses? You drunken fool, Jones, you played into my hands, never has a choicer chance for a haul been laid out for the taking. It was made to order for us, your pageant, why try for petty cash with the Disabled Veterans' plea that has brought us a good take? No guns in Jezebel except the sheriff's eighty thousand dollars in gold all sacked up."

He turned and faced the desert. Out there the great cloud of dust rolled, rushing over the distance. The faint yelling of hundreds of voices, the rattling crash of hundreds of shots carried over the sands. Dimly the shapes of the horde of riders with the wagons pitching behind him began to appear. Jezebel's old settlers, re-enacting the madness of their first rush seemed to be going even madder as they spurred, lashed, shouted and shot their way for Silver Street.

"Not a gun will be left loaded when they get here," snarled Bardo. "And so—" He lifted his whistle and it blasted again. Barranza!"

"I come, Senor Capitan."

From the mouth of an alley only yards away debouched a procession of men and horses. At its head, holding a sixgun rode the broken-nosed Mexican, who had been standing beside Union Jones at the Arizona Palace bar. Behind him rode four villainous looking Mexicans, each leading a horse with while I hit Bardo."

"The damn flat-nosed Latino which savvies no English!" exploded Union. "Heck, I spilled my hull suspicions an' my plans ter outwit Simon Legree right in front o' one o' his gang. No wonder he sicked the bow-wow on me. Barranza, the drink-dodger, an' four Mex bravos hid back till now, an' waited ter pack up the loot. An' migaw, thar she goes!"

"Load!" ordered Bardo. The men in the wagon bent swiftly to their task. Overside went the small sacks of gold pieces and into

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the panniers of the led horses, brought beside the wagon. One minute, two minutes more and the treasure would be packed on racing horse-flesh, the riders would swing to saddle.

"Mexico five miles away!" exulted Bardo. "A mile's clean start on that stupid mob out there." He motioned toward the desert beyond the end of Silver Street. In a wave the riders and wagons were coming, their shooting and yelling swelled to appalling proportions. "Winded horses, winded men, empty guns. Sixguns and the dogs to clear our path for us. Out, Lothair, our Friedrich! To ground!"

THE dogs leaped from the wagon and prowled the sand, jaws wide. Before them the crowd gave way. Bared mastiff teeth backed by sixgun muzzles were too much for the strongest nerves.

A deep groan burst from Union. His bulging eyes swept hopelessly up the street. Out there on the desert the charging cavalcade loomed closer every second, in whirling dust the fighting men of Jezebel were sweeping down—too late.

"You have got us, Bardo!" he gagged. "You have ruint a hundred years o' progress in Jezebel."

Bardo turned and his teeth went back in a snarl like that of his dogs. "You red-nosed clown! You were easy to take. Ready, men?"

"We are ready, Senor Capitan," called the broken-nosed Barranza. Bardo jumped from the stage to the wagon, off it to the ground and hoisted himself into the saddle. Onto Union's right hand held across his waist something hot fell and scattered. He looked down, the ash from his cigar had dropped on the hand that held two Roman candles. His eyes bulged out even further.

"Not a gun, but a weppin!" he gurgled and brought the lighted cigar butt down with his left hand. It touched, the fuses of the Roman candles began to splutter.

"You lousy bogus," he said. "You stink worse nor yore dawgs."

The words were low but they carried. Bardo swivelled on his horse, one hand held high to signal the getaway of the gold-loaded cavalcade.

"For that, you drunken braggart, you get the dogs. Lothair, Friedrich!" He pointed straight at Union. The dogs growled, and swept up into the clear sand behind the wagon. "They'll be on the stage in one jump, Jones. The second jump, they have you."

"Gawd!" breathed Union, looking into avid yellow fangs. "They are prison dawgs! Catch-an'-kill dawgs."

"Hol' on, Mistuh Union, hol' on! Ah am comin'!"

Along the top of the awnings with the small fry scattering before him came Thomas Jefferson, in a wild charge. The fighting tribal look was back in his face, he held his double-barrelled shotgun at his hip. It came up.

"Get that damn Uncle Tom!" roared Bardo, and fired.

"The dawgs, Uncle Jeff!" shrieked Union. "Get the dawgs! I got Bardo!"

The muscles of the mastiffs were bunched ready for the spring that would send them flying onto the stage. Their paws dug deep into the hard sand; they were bestial projectiles.

"Charge, Lothair! Charge, Friedrich! Take Jones' throat out!"

Roars burst from the dogs' chests, the roars were drowned in the incredibly fast crashes of two barrels fired almost like one. The dogs' hindquarters tore apart in red ruin, their launching legs collapsed. In howling agony they rolled and threshed, bodies torn apart by the storm of buckshot that hit them. Steady as a rock, Thomas Jefferson stood as Bardo's lead whipped past him. His hand went into his pocket and came out with two more brass shells. He broke his shotgun's breech and reached for the exploded cartridges.

"Jammed, Mistuh Union!" he groaned.

"Hit the roof!" yelled Union. "Stay down dhile I hit Bardo."

He raised the sputtering Roman candles and leveled them at Bardo, who had whirled to look at him.

"Gun Union Jones!" screamed Bardo, insane rage twisting his face. Without the shield of the glasses his face showed brutal and ruthless. "Gun Jones, and ride!"

His sixgun spouted metal and it passed Union's cheek. In Union's hand one of the Roman candles rocked, its flame erupted and went out in a streak. Its ball burst too soon and scattered on the stage.

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"Ouch, I misguessed!"

The second candle exploded, its fire trail lanced and this time it hits its mark. Squarely in the center of Bardo's forehead the fire ball blew in blazing, splintering force. Bardo's horse reared, he dropped his gun and clutched at the saddle horn, shrieking his pain.

In Union's grip both candles began to go off and he swiveled them as though they were a double-barrelled weapon, shooting indiscriminately at men and horses.

"Fire, Pale an' Wan, fire!" he howled. "Give 'em all the candles you got! Hit the horses, hit the men, hit everything! They're damn bandits!"

"Blooee to banditsee!"

PALE AND WAN appeared behind the top of the tarpaulin mountain, waving an assortment of fireworks in Oriental glee and touching them off with a lighted sulphur match. Shots crashed at Union from Bardo's men, Americans and Mexicans alike, trying for him, but the slugs were going high, far and wide. The mounts plunged and reared under the hail of fireballs, they screamed as flame burst on their flanks.

"Behold, I cast my prophecies into the cause of Jezebel!" thundered the Prophet Jimberjaw. "Lo, the sheaves!" He poised in magnificent attitude on the Arizona Palace porch as the outlaws got their horses under momentary control and pressed forward for a getaway. Arms aloft, holding his pile of manuscript, the prophet slung it, it scattered into a hundred separate sheets that swirled and fluttered at the animals' eyes. Every horse went madder as the strange white cloud burst into its pain-stirred vision. Bardo had drawn a hand across his streaming eyes, his forehead was one great red blister.

"Fight those horses down!" he shouted. "Blow your way out! There go the last of the fireworks!"

"Too true," groaned Union. He dropped the shot-out Roman candles. Above and behind him Pale and Wan had vanished discreetly into cover, his makeshift ammunition gone. "But here come the guns, Bardo. Comin' hell-hootin' on horseback. Thar be several old settlers o' Jezebel, which I forgot would not be drinkin' an' expendin' their ammunition away into midair. Bandits! Bandits! Major Shenandoah an' Jedge Jeffers, shoot, shoot!"

In a single split the crowd on Silver Street parted and there was disclosed the reenacted treasure rush coming through from the desert. Out in advance of it rode the figures of two of Jezebel's most prominent citizens. Black slouch hat clamped on his iron-gray hair, mustaches and imperial bristling, Major Sidney Cornwallis Smyth, editor-owner of the Jezebel *Courier*, and late of Jeb Stuart's cavalry, rowelled his magnificent chestnut Gallant Traveler. Beside him spurred Judge Jeffers, also in black broadcloth, powerful face grim, a saddlebag judge with a Winchester under his knee in its scabbard.

"The editor nor the jedge ain't drunk," declaimed Union. Shoot Major, fer gaw sake, shoot Jedge!"

"Coming, Union!" Major Shenandoah shouted back. His keen soldier's eye had the situation in a second. "Coming! Take their flanks, Judge, I shall take their center."

JUDGE JEFFERS reined his horse to a standstill on a dime, and swung up his Winchester at two hundred yards. Jezebel's leading judge was its leading cougar hunter when not holding court; he began to hit and hit hard with his first shots. On the other side of Major Shenandoah rode Rancher Bill Coleman, foe of rustlers. His raised sixguns also were loaded. They stormed for a broken band of desperadoes, bent only on shooting their way out. Crazily vocal, a mass of cowboys, miners and citizens in all kinds of resurrected vehicles were pounding along Silver Street behind the spearhead and when they hit, unarmed or not, it would be like a tidal wave.

Shot traded shot as once again, in its turbulent history, Silver Street roared with gunfire. Then, quickly as it had started, the battle was over. Four men only of the nine sat in their saddles and their hands were up. Half-blinded and half-crazed with rage, Bardo was foaming curses. Horses were down, threshing on the sand and their gold-heavy panniers had spilled their loads.

"What is this, Union?" demanded Major Shenandoah, towering over the crowd on Gallant Traveler. Surging, the treasure rush had ended and mounted men and vehicles jammed the street before the stage.

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"A try fer the eighty thousand in jolly yaller boys by a skrim-shankin' imposter which claimed he fit at Gettysburg. He be—" Union looked down at the Paradise sheriff who had got to his feet, holding a hand to his smashed head. "Who be he, Mister Paradise Sheriff?"

Sheriff Sam Blake looked with calm at Bardo. He appeared a lawman who took his bumps equably. "He is Franz Snyder, formerly head jailer at San Quentin, California pen, and this Mex and Yank gang of his came out of Murderers' Row. He was stripped of his office and held for trial on charges of brutality and sellin' drugs to the inmates. Waitin' trial right in the pen he had a hidden gun, decoyed a keeper into his cell, killed him and took his uniform."

"Ho!" said Union. "Which explains the Comrade's bullit through his heart. I recollect now the Army sold a hull raft of its old surplusage uniforms ter State institutions fer guards an' keepers blouses."

"He got the keeper's keys, let loose these killers and got into the arsenal. Then he charged the gate fer out and away, takin' the dogs with him, which he had trained himself to capture fugitives. The warnin' circular with full descriptions got to Paradise only yesterday and this mornin' I dropped into the tellygraph offis to find out about the line which was down. There was that start of the message from Jezebel which made me hump here right fast."

"Comrade Bardo-Snyder," said Union. "You cut that Paradise wire."

The exposed Bardo glared at him.

"Cut it? He took a hundred feet out of it seven miles from Jezebel. Okay, Franz Snyder, you and your gang go back to San Quentin and you face rope."

Sheriff Lew Barton stepped forward, holding his smashed wrist with his free hand.

"Six armed men to hustle these lobos into the calaboose. Bardo, you are just another hard smart character made a play at lootin' Jezebel's treasure. You were good but not good enough."

"Comrade Bogus Bardo, which never fit at Gettysburg, you have met yore Appomatox," declared Union as men pushed in around the remnants of the gang and the crowd parted to let the prisoners and their escort through. "Feller inmates o' Jezebel, the Prophet havin' cast his prophecies ter the winds, I declare that the great centennial pageant o' Jezebel has come ter a glorious finish."

"It was lousy!" rose the howl. "You was the most godawful exhibition ever seed!"

"Lettin' loose a holdup on innercent spectators!"

"Hang Union Jones!"

Union's blazing red face contorted.

"After all, the moilin' an' toilin' I have did an' the polished actin I have given you outer the fulness o my heart, I git this!"

"You have charged yore new red shirt an' blue jeans an' boots off ter the pageant's expenses, we have just found out. Yore Foundered Father's canteen air full o' likker also charged ter the ticket-buyers."

"Hang Union Jones!"

"I feel like King O'Leary amidst his ungrateful darters," bellowed Union. "Lynch me, you would? Lissen!" He held his hand aloft in a regal gesture. "Be a Vigilance Committee, would you, you ingrate inmates? I call upon every livin' soul in this assemblage ter which I owe money ter come forward an' defend me. No swingin' corpse has ever bin known ter pay up nuthin' on the dollar. Ah, from all sides are swarmin' the Loyal Creditors Committee ter defend their potential assets agin the lawless Vigilants!"

"Rescue Union Jones, I got his IOU fer $25!"

"I got it fer $15!"

"I got it fer . . ."

"Who ain't got it?"

The counter-cries roared along Silver Street mounting in numbers. Union beamed and made an even more royal gesture.

"Thank you, my loyal creditors. So I conclude the pageant with a deathless bit o' poetry I jest thought up."

As Foundin' Father o' Jezebel
I bid you all a long farewell.
Upon no stage shall I appear
Fer at least another hundred year.

The shout rose from hundreds of voices as though they were one, the total community voice of Jezebel, its clashing and varied individuals agreed at last upon one solid fact.

"Thank Gaw!"

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Curiosities By Weill

GIANT BEAVERS WHICH ROAMED NORTH AMERICA DURING THE ICE AGE WERE AS LARGE AS BEARS
THE FIRST RECORDED USE OF ROCKETS WAS BY THE CHINESE WHO USED THEM IN WARFARE 18 CENTURIES AGO
THE FIRST RAY OF THE DORSAL FIN OF THE DRAGONET HAS A GREATLY DEVELOPED LONG SPUR SUPPORTING A SCIMITAR-SHAPED, BRIGHTLY TINTED MEMBRANE WHICH IS CAPABLE OF INFLICTING A MOST PAINFUL AND DANGEROUS WOUND

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. . . . Getting and Hoarding Assorted Loot May Become the Very Wellspring of a Man's Existence

THE UNFINISHED FAN

By B. E. COOK

HARDEN BAYLE ignored me to stroll around his secret room, appraising his peculiar collection of forbidden goods. He reached up to right a picture. He flecked a speck of dust off a polished table. He fingered the sacred scroll which had found its way so strangely from the top of the world down to the sea and up again to this room, high above the Hudson.

Let him reach and finger and fleck; I was content to be ignored. Sooner or later he would spring his demands, positive that I'd go and fetch—as usual. If there is one softer thread in the steel mail of his hardness, I vow it is this secret room. Born to riches, he'd accumulated a fortune. Born to a social eminence, he was regarded a pillar of that society. I truly believe, then, that getting and hoarding the assorted loot became the wellspring of his existence, the escape from the social mould, the release of the animal in the man.

As for myself, his missions were the salt of my existence. Long ago, by my own act, I had banished myself from his stratum of society, but I do not regret that. In a way, I am richer far than Bayle; for I love both this room and the sea.

Bayle paused before me, disliking my complacency and sensing, doubtless, the gist of my mental wanderings. He must probe, make me squirm. "Doesn't all this mean anything to you?" he demanded. "Damn it,

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you hand over the loot like a grocer's boy. You used to come brimful of fire and imagination."

Then he called me a clod and I let him have it straight. "That loot of yours? What does it mean to yourself? The cash you can spend by the handful, the nasty hold you've got over me, this secret gloating over beating the law. For myself, every item here represents sharp thinking and swift action, pitting my wits against the law, risking my life. And occasionally turning the tables on you! For instance, the case of the senor's cane. Oh, you got the cane, but you ate crow, b'gawd, served Mexican style."

Ah that baleful look in his eyes. I liked it! Once in a while it was I who did the sticking. That cane affair had indeed cost him plenty and there were other affairs wherein the secondary urge for a possession had soured under the Ministrations of my guiding hand.

A miasma of hate rose between us for a moment. My fists hunkered to get at Bayle's throat; I well knew my strength, knew his cries for help could never be heard outside. Why, his body could rot in this room, built so secretly that its very existence was not evident.

Then he laughed in his nasty fashion. He knew what was on my mind. "There is an old rhyme about a gingham dog and a calico cat," he intoned. "They ate each other up."

I got it. If anything mysterious happened to him, his lawyer had a sealed document —no, I couldn't shake off my fetters that way.

"There's the matter of a certain fan," he said next and I knew he was off. The fire of my hate, the miasma, died away. Aye, there was indeed a tie between us and this room the witness to that bond.

"Fans have interesting history," he launched forth and nothing would shorten it. Whether he does this for my edification or to irritate, I've yet to decide.

"Fans figure in Sanskrit poetry. In ancient Egypt, the position of fan bearer to the pharaoh went only to those of royal lineage. Delicate fans were common in China when our ancestors snarled over bones in caves. Fans from Cathay were introduced into Europe by Portuguese sailors, sixteenth century, pleated fans. Those early numbers were undoubtedly broad leaves or imitations of leaves."

"So you crave now a palm leaf for this collection?" I prompted.

He couldn't be hurried. "Fans became the vogue in Europe's courts and it is said that a fan used properly by a fair lady could become as deadly as a rapier, revealing whatever she chose, concealing whatever she would withhold. They became elaborate things and costly. Bitter rivalries arose over them."

"So there is a certain fan, you began I hazarded again.

"Yes. Made especially for a certain lady in court circles at the time of Louis XV."

So much for the "what" of this mission; now "where" to? Bayle didn't even nibble at my bait, kept swimming round in fan talk. "As I've said, fans became elaborate and expensive. The leaf, made of parchment or silk, bore miniatures by the famous artists of the day and a feud still exists between those claiming that Watteau decorated fans and those who deny it, a sort of Shakespeare-Bacon argument.

"But the real worth lay in the sticks. Where the leaf might wear out, the sticks lasted for centuries, made of tortoise shells, mother of pearl or ivory. Ivory became the best medium for some of the world's finest carving. Nor were fans made in one place or by one person. Whole towns became skilled in one operation such as processing ivory sticks or thinning them down to the thickness of calling cards or doing the carving, the most exquisite operation of all. For it was done in relief, a thirty-second of an inch at the deepest. Yet the features of the faces, details of garments, bird plumage and flower details were distinctly modeled. Sometimes the relief work was accentuated by rubbing pigment into crevices for better shadows.

"In turns, the first operations were done in towns up and down the countryside—Dieppe, St. Genevieve, Andeville, Labossiere—while the leaf was made elsewhere, then sent on the artists for ornamentation. Like violin making, ivory carving ran in families. Youngsters began on discarded ivory sticks and scraps. Every home was a workshop. Men did the delicate carving until their eyes became impaired, driving them to join the women in the farming

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chores. Have you any interest in movies?"

For a moment I thought I'd misunderstood him.

"Do you read motion picture news?"

I still groped for the connection when he snapped, "Well?"

I was seeing ivory carvings and bent shouldered artisans, eager to hear more fan talk. Wasn't Bayle overdoing his baiting? "No to both questions."

"You're going to mix with them now," he said. "The fan I want is the subject of a movie now in production, slated to open in about three weeks. Get me that fan."

Wow, what a humdinger! Had Bayle gone nuts? Next he'd be demanding of me the song of a bird or the odor of the white pine. The fan from a movie indeed.

Harden Bayle produced his watch and that always was the signal. The interview was ended. I had my orders.

IT HARDLY became the mate of an old freighter like the *Edgemont* to be caught with a fistful of such literature. I shoved the magazines under my coat. Always I maintained a room ashore as my nearest approach to a home. There I went to lay out my first course.

The story, they said, was true, the love affair between a boy and girl. She, reared in a convent, was brought into the corrupt court life of Paris by a mother on the fringe of the inner circle, greatly reduced financially, hungry for money and influence, and exploiting her daughter as her ace in the hole.

The boy, a Huguenot from Normandy, comes to the court as courier for his family who are skilled artisans in ivory carving. Jacques is a sensitive idealist who has dreamed of just such a maiden as Heloise, but never had hoped to meet one in the flesh.

However, they do meet in the rose garden where Heloise has run away from a social affair. She finds the court life too noisy and confusing. The women make her ill at ease, the men terrify her and she yearns for convent life again. Then she meets Jacques.

He visits court often for at the time, fans are the rage and the sticks carved by artisans up his way are the *dernier cri*. So boy and girl contrive what they think are secret meetings, but madame is not deceived. Aware that her daughter is maturing, she keeps a sharp eye on the girl and she learns many things. There's no future for Heloise in this romance but she doesn't mind a little interlude, so one day she "happens in on the pair" and plays along. Oh, she has her schemes.

And first of all, she covets a fan for Heloise since to appear in court without one is almost indecent, emphasizing one's poverty. To be able herself to flutter a fan made up there in Jacques' region would be a grand feather in her cap of ambition.

How simple! Guide the infatuated Jacques into promising Heloise the fan sticks and why not blackmail artists for the leaf? Unsuspecting Heloise is of course delighted, especially since Jacques asks her to select the subject to be carved on the sticks.

But there is more than meets the eye. At this time, Madame Maintenon, king's mistress and withal a devout woman, is throwing her influence against the Huguenots, eventually to induce the king to revoke the Edict of Nantes which has protected all Huguenots ever since the reign of Henry IV.

Now this family of ivory carvers are Huguenots. Father and oldest brother figure in the Huguenot councils. Any whisps of information Heloise's scheming mother can spill into royal ears will be rewarded and thereby a fine marriage for her daughter should result.

Unsuspecting, wholly absorbed in his romance, Jacques lets fall certain vital secrets, disclosing the names of certain nobles to whom he delivers messages when he comes to Paris, revealing the meeting places of plotters against the crown.

The fan is completed. All but one stick and Heloise can't make up her mind. The final stick must be the most intricate, beautiful thing ever carved, a fitting expression of her happiness. But mother has got her foot inside the door—and the king's approval for the betrothal of Heloise to a vile old rake of a noble. But rich. Ah, so very rich!

NOW to give Jacques his walking ticket. True, the fan isn't completed, but with her future prospects the girl can own a dozen fans to her taste. She might make some to do about Jacques, yes? Ah, there's

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a whole world between a wealthy noble and a romantic ivory carver. French girls do as they are told.

The Edict is about to be revoked. Before her Heloise, mother accuses Jacques of being a Huguenot traitor, taunts him with disclosing his party's secrets, scorns him for an easy mark—the likes of mere him, offering Heloise a fan when she's to marry a wealthy nobleman who'll buy her fans without limit.

Of course, this is as much news to the girl as to her lover. But Jacques doesn't believe her protests. He curses the both of them for their trickery. Heloise pleads to be heard, but he vows he'll give his very life, if necessary, to destroy both king and corrupt court.

Whereupon the mother, too sure of herself, does some info spilling herself. Whatever Jacques hopes to do, she declares, will avail nothing because the Edict is about to be revoked. Every proven Huguenot will be declared a traitor. She realizes her mistake immediately when Jacques dashes out. She sets thugs on his trail. He is all but murdered, yet he manages to return home and warn his family like a Paul Revere.

On top of this comes the Massacre of St. Bartholomew. Jacques's family gets away, thanks to Jacques, away to England, thence to America with their possessions and that includes the unfinished fan. Jacques, however, remained behind and died fighting. Heloise, exceptionally resistant for a young French girl, refused to marry the nobleman and returned to her beloved convent to take the veil.

QUITE a run-of-the-mill film? Well, like the first glimmer of dawn, one thread of recognition quivered across my consciousness. Huguenots—ivory fan sticks. Damn Bayle's soul, he'd kept his tight mouth shut and left me to remember. Of course I knew that fan!

In my mind's eye I could see its tattered silk leaf, its exquisitely carved sticks, one of them blank. I hadn't been particularly impressed in those faraway days when attending Madame Turcotte's stiff, boresome soirees. Her house had been full of such objects suitable for museums rather than to be lived with. I knew there had been a legend regarding the fan, but it hadn't impressed me. Apparently it had registered with Bayle; now he wanted it. Was there ever to be any limit to his greed? Madame Turcotte's precious fan, and she was Armand's mother.

Armand had been our classmate at the university on the Charles, a rare lad with that unusual sweetness of soul and brilliant intellect combination. To us of the matter-of-fact and less articulate stock from British ancestry, he had been our unashamed romantic, a gallant gentleman. He had given great promise as a poet. Armand had died in the first world war in France, a volunteer under the American flag.

Why did Bayle covet this fan? Because its story was the subject of a prospectively popular movie? Did he wish to treasure some object connected with Armand? Neither seemed likely. Every object in Bayle's collection was a "must not" and I doubted that a tiger of Bayle's ilk ever changed his markings.

The magazines gave me the clue.

The movie, "The Unfinished Fan," was to open in New York in three weeks. Then, and in subsequent openings in several large cities, star Lillian Haver would make personal appearances carrying the authentic fan which Jacques had carved in his love for Heloise three centuries ago. So that was Bayle's lure—"The star will carry the fan, the real fan with its unfinished stick." No other fan would serve, so Bayle must have it. Without his saying so, he must have it before the opening and that was a natural for Harden Bayle.

Aged Madame must have died. I recalled her as a stiffneck, exclusive as they come, proud as a peacock. So far as I knew, she had left no heirs; I had to presume, then, that in settling her estate the story and the fan had somehow become the property of movie producers. Could be.

So, me for an office handling the publicity for the movies. I presented myself as one doing a thesis on promotion by advertising. I may have looked a bit old for a student but since the war many a man has rounded out his education without regard for age. Also I came equipped with the right quality of English; after all, I did get a sheepskin on the Charles.

I suggested we take for our subject the promotion of the moving picture and be-

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came amazed at the influence of the coming fan story. So soon! Its coming attraction had been worked into a dozen different lines of interest. Already there were such things—fads—as fan jewelry, fabrics in the fan motif, fan-shaped vases. It was rumored that no formal dance could be correct this coming season without its battery of fans. Hell, man, how could the picture fail after all the women had been so cleverly conditioned?

The lady I talked with proved very obliging with all this. I had my mouth half open to spring the sixty-four-dollar question when she asked: "Have you perhaps seen the ivory carver?"

I didn't relish being drawn off my subject. I played along. Said she, I could see him in the lobby of a certain hotel—or was it in a theatre downtown? This she rated as the master stroke, this and the giving away of the fans.

"Is the real fan on exhibition anywhere?" I inquired.

"That precious one will come to light on the opening night." And she spoke in a hush-hush manner I dared not force further because I mustn't become at all conspicuous in connection with these objects I loot for Bayle. Indirectly I did fish for more details, but without luck.

I left with a fistful of notes, nothing in my head. I'd drained that source; where next?

Well, when hard put for an idea, I hark for a clue, a stray idea, some pertinent word dropped which will give me a lead. I could not introduce myself to the star, now out on the West Coast, but there was that ivory carver.

Next, to the theatre where the opening was anticipated, noting store windows en route. Fan vogue? I saw its jewelry in every shape from earrings down to buckles. It reminded me of quest for the golden horse jewelry piece Bayle sent me after in Brazil.

I found the ivory carver—in a glass cage. He looked altogether too much the part, somebody's exaggerated conception of a French artisan, a slender fellow bent over his work. This hid his face but he had the long, sensitive artisan's fingers and outside the cage a mob of the curious pressed to the glass. Animal in a zoo!

The attendant told me it was thus all six hours he was there, three in the afternoon, three in the evening. Somehow that sickened me. Maybe because always there's a pen waiting for me if I make one slip on these assignments; I hate to see anything alive penned in, especially a human. Which probably was silly for doubtless the Frenchie got a whale of a kick out of it all.

POSTED in a dozen places were papers giving the man's name, birthplace and the appealing fact that he was a wounded veteran turning to the skill of his forebears to make his living. The sticks he carved would go into fans, replicas of the one in the movie to be drawn by tickets at each of ten big opening nights. (Save your stubs, folks!) Winners would be entitled also to various other handouts such as washing machines, fur coats and so on. Yeah, my first contact with the post-war handout system. We're secluded aboard the *Edgemont*.

As for that bent figure and my business, no soap. I headed away when a scuffle started around the cage and the husky attendant dove in and came up dragging two youths. They had drummed on the glass and yelled nasty jeers which apparently had penetrated the glass shell.

For a moment the carver's hands had ceased moving. Without raising his head he'd looked up through his brows with a hatred that distorted his features. Then his eyes had fallen and the hands resumed work. It had come and gone so quickly, but the look had been poisonous.

All of this was aside from my business, but I still hoped for some clue, some helpful idea to go on. Bayle gives me so little!

I led the attendant to talk. "I can't explain it," he said. "They're at him much of the time to make him look up. Girls flutter their skirts, boys get rough, men and women too like baiting a bear in a den. When it's time to go home, this gets worse. The police have threatened to close this out, but you know how smart the movies can throw sticks around for advertising—and the more publicity, the better."

Just as he said, there was a near riot at four o'clock. They roped off the area to let the carver through. I watched again for that flash of rage. All I saw was a veteran struggling to manipulate his artificial legs to a taxi. What a civilization! What atavistic

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traits can lead ordinarily kindly people to bait a man to wrath, then gawk on the shame of his infirmities?

The attendant couldn't tell me where the carver lived, "but he'll be back again for the seven-to-ten stretch."

Well, I have my own channels of information. I located his lodging. Also further facts which might or might not serve. That ivory carver had been in with rather bad company for the past few nights.

ONE of them was in his rooms when I appeared up a creaking stairway unobserved and flung the flimsy door open. I surprised the man because he had relaxed there to wait for the Frenchman's return. We thrashed around somewhat before I got him quieted, but I had no fears of attracting outside attention in that squalid, noisy neighborhood. I tied him up, surveyed the vicinity and dragged him into the room across the hall. I stuffed him inside a closet and shut the door. The way I had him trussed up and gagged, he might do quite a stretch in there before being discovered. So much for Jake Rance and he'd been the Frenchman's visitor for the past three nights.

I returned to the cheap room, thinking how far afield this was from my hunt for a fan. I despised the gang Jake Rance traveled with, though, and welcomed the diversion, hoping it would jolt them.

Shortly after ten, the clank and drag of artificial limbs. They weren't of the best and he hadn't become used to them. I had my story ready for him without being sure of what the point of it all would be. I hoped only to learn where in hell that fan was, in case he knew.

Fancy the letdown when he entered, gave me an indifferent glance and shambled to a chair, slumping low with closed eyes. I studied him carefully. Frail, young for a veteran, utterly weary, downcast, he seemed on the verge of collapse.

I produced a bottle and poured him a finger or so. He gasped over it as though accustomed to that feeble wine they swill in France by the gallon. Then he talked and although French is next to my mother tongue, his dialect puzzled me. He had expected somebody else. Where was Mr. Rance?

"Couldn't come," I said. "Sent me instead."

Since this got by, I offered another drink. He didn't want it, but was too polite to refuse. Politeness after what he'd been through? Hell!

But it was loosening his tongue, he might tell me about the fan. Through my leads he poured out his heart and there was plenty to pour. Until the old familiar argument rose within me: Why all this? Bayle sent you for the fan. This time do not get soft. You can't cure society's ills, you're outside the pale yourself.

Out of his patois came this. He, François Benet, had been so grateful when the American contracted him for ivory carving in Beeg New York over in America at what seemed so fabulous a sum of money—when counted in francs. With all that wealth he could get his struggling family onto its feet. War had laid waste their farm. He, the only surviving male with missing legs, was proud too since this proved that he must have mastered the skill of his forebears, the famous ivory carvers.

Despite returning to the land, it was lucky that every boy had undergone training to maintain the outgrown custom as a veneration of the past. True, it had offered no apparent worth to him—"but half a man cannot till a farm so I carved ivory into tiny mementoes for tourists. Then this offer." Always a quiet, sensitive person, he had shrunk from pity, keeping to himself, finding pleasure in increasing perfection at the work and in his thoughts.

Imagine the disillusion, the shame! The seeming fortune threatened to melt when he met expenses with dollars. He ate meagerly. Thanks to friend Rance, he'd found cheap lodgings. (Thanks to Rance indeed. I recognized the psychology in this sort of thing.)

BUT Rance alone was his friend among the mob that howled at him. Rance with the kindly word for the homesick and discouraged young fellow; who else had cared that day after day François struggled for a steady hand, working in the awful cage packed around with the mob's eyes? How abysmal his disappointment in Americans. Even while watching that beautiful, almost sacred fan develop, they had be-

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haved as though he were a thief. Never had he been left alone with it. While he handled it, feeling its delicate traceries, sketching its patterns for his copy, eternally he was watched. "Not one time," he wailed, "did the madame of the house greet me, she the forefathers of whom had fashioned it and—"

Right there I lost his drift for I had what I wanted. Old Madame was still alive? And the fan in her possession? The liquor still kept his tongue going so ceaselessly that I could depart without his noticing. By tomorrow he'd be better fit to recollect my call? Not at all. I'd walked through an orchard of my desire and the right apple had fallen into my fists. Aye, that fan should be in Bayle's secret room so soon that I wouldn't miss the sailing hour of the old *Edgemont.*

I rushed for a ticket to Boston. Without a long wait, I boarded a train and relaxed in a seat; I've learned to snatch it under any conditions. And all this was so simple that I needn't make the elaborate plans I often have to.

I knew mighty well the old house where that fan could be found. I've looted many a place that was far more heavily guarded than an ancient home set deep in shrubbery shrouded grounds—and occupied by an old woman with a few servants. Even if there should be a dog—I have a way with dogs.

So all I had to do now was catch up on sleep.

François' pale features persisted before my closed eyes. The steady clank of the wheels resolved into the clank and drag of his footsteps. Confound it! What business was it of mine that a young French war casualty came to America starry eyed to discover that the world is tough in any language? Let him go through with the bitter lesson. Only three weeks more and he'd return home with his sock well filled.

Go home? Return? That was what got to me. What a picture he'd take back, sensation seekers, the thoughtless fringe crowded around his cage. Why, close at hand, had he but realized, in that great city were hundreds of thousands of kindly Americans who would have opened their hearts to him. Countless genuine lovers of real art would have appreciated his craftsmanship had it been presented to them properly. Warmth and fellowship and understanding might have come his way but for that Rance and what his gang was concocting. And Rance had gotten to Jacques first. So many heads to the beast his ilk serve, making a thousand avenues of attack possible!

JAKE RANCE'S assignment was to contact foreigners who would shortly return home; poison their minds against the States. Oh it doesn't sound important to you, but I have met them again and again in European ports and in countries south. Only a man here and there but he says cynically, *"Oui,* I was there, I know what America is. Terrible!"

How Rance contacted François I'll never know. The fellow was a natural, being sensitive and confused in the vast rush and to do in the great city. And Rance had done a favor; he had located Jacques a cheaper lodging. The perfect start. No doubt the movie people had settled him in a more decent place but the squalor of this one had confined his contacts to the lowest of humanity.

And I wouldn't put it above Rance's crowd to instigate that rough stuff out around the cage. For the onlookers it was nearer than the zoo—for three weeks, then François would bear his shrinking, wounded ego home. Thereafter, *"Voila,"* as the French say. One small man only and in a small French village? Multiply him by hundreds like him and you get the seeds of public opinion. All attacks on a country aren't made with bombs, remember. Hate!

Could I sleep, then? Damn François' tragic fate and Jake Rance's breed. Yes, and Harden Bayle. I'd let old Madame Turcotte in for her share to boot. What had I against her? Nothing personal, but she shattered the picture, the stiff-necked old bird. Armand's mother who'd played the grand dame, what a fitting picture frame she made for the lad I'd known and loved! And now she was selling her family secrets and her most prized possession for money. Even if she had come to want—hard to believe—when I'd known her she'd have starved rather than commercialize her family traditions. In this fashion she was letting Armand down. Understand me? I had no compunctions now about looting her fan;

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better that Bayle have it than that the movie theatres make the grab.

Had I reached Boston at this stage of reasoning, all would have gone well. However, in the hour it takes from Providence to Boston, my unwilling thoughts raced back to the present day François and I knew I had to face it.

Very well, I would, but only after the fan would be safe in Bayle's keeping.

I LEFT the train before daybreak, thinking that on the *Edgemont's* bridge I'd have seen its first dim gleam. Here the street lights persisted. I rode the subway to its end, climbed the hill into the Brookline that is untouched by the sprawling city, exclusive, aristocratic and unhurried, where old families live out their serene lives. Dewy green lawns and sleepy birds chirping and not a soul on the streets yet.

Certainly nobody at Madame's would be stirring at this hour. That thought speeded my steps. I could be done and off with it before anybody was about. And here was the estate with its shrubs showing above its high, plastered wall all around. No front gate for me. I looked further and found the service entrance gate off the kitchen. Locked. I forced the rusty lock and it opened with an ungodly creak. I stood motionless; no dog.

Inside the rear yard I got the start of my life. Not ten feet away, an old woman leaned over a hoe. Having heard me, she waited to see what next and that so addled me that I took a backward step away. Her sharp voice snapped out: "You take care, young man, you're stepping on my carrots!"

No mistaking that arrogant Turcotte voice. The shabby old woman was facing down what might be a dangerous character. "Madame Turcotte," I gasped.

Her piercing old eyes bored into mine. She called me by name. Hell's brass bells, what next? We stared and the years rolled back. She had known me only when Armand had been the living pride of her heart. What had time done to us? Me with my sheepskin and that damning paper in Bayle's possession, she with the persistent aristocratic airs leaning on her hoe.

In a flash my brain and eye coordinated. The estate was woefully run down, unkept. The only spot well tended was the kitchen garden, and no gardener to do the grounds where once smooth terraces and flower beds had flourished, and no signs of a cook. Only this aged woman hoeing before the neighbors were up to see and pity her, and not a trace of fear. Well, now what?

She had the same idea. "What have you come here for?"

Complications churned in my brain, defying explanation. This was a person for straight dealings, right from the shoulder. Without further ado I declared, "I've come to steal your ivory fan."

No yelling for help, no sobbing. She drew herself up straighter, gripped that hoe firmly and said, "You interest me. We shall talk it over."

I grinned. She was running true to form, always presuming that the world revolved on its axis purely for her amusement. Can you imagine that? Believe it or not, we were in her kitchen inside two minutes over strong, hot coffee in delicate china cups, stirred with thin silver spoons. I could have managed a heaty meal; none was offered. The larder was probably lean.

I watched her for any hint of an SOS signal. Not a trace of it. For once I was stuck for words although a scheme was growing in mind. She was undoubtedly in want, terribly so and that explained things. Well, I had a wad of Bayle's folding stuff aboard to offer her. But the offer stuck in my throat for I felt as she always had made me feel. How could I offer Madame Turcotte money? Better far to tie her up and make off with the fan.

How could she have me apprehended for this? The name she knew me by was already on the police books, but what possible connection could there be here with that name and the mate abroad an old freighter? Aye, tie her up was my best move and take the fan.

Then what should enter my mind but the face of that miserable ivory carver. I saw again his sensitive fingers, heard the mob around the glass cage, saw his abrupt, resentful stare. Damn it, he had no hold on me. Suddenly I cursed with all the fluency of the waterfront.

"Is it perhaps the fan that makes you resort to words so foul?" she asked. "Why do you wish to steal it?"

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The moment for binding her had gone. I was in for a battle and my blood speeded for the challenge. Fists or brains, I like it!"

"Why?" I threw at her. "For the same reason you're peddling your family's history and heirlooms, cold cash."

She didn't bat an eye. Her stare was so deep and boring it gave me the willies. "You do not understand. It is not for myself I am doing this shameful thing. No, I require very little. I do it for Armand."

Was she mad? Armand's bones had long since united with the soil.

Then I got the story. It seems there'd been a flier in the last war. He'd been shot down and his people had donated a fountain on a public playground to his memory. Get her drift? A memorial to Armand.

"I had no money, but I had the story and the fan. I sold the story to the agent, I refused to sell the fan. So long as one Turcotte is alive, it cannot be sold. That is in the will. The agent would not buy the story without the fan being shown in the theatres. So, it still will be mine and I shall have the money for the memorial to Armand, a stone bench where weary aged women like me sit and watch children at play. Armand's name will be on it, Armand who gave his life for France."

I didn't set her right, but I marveled at her love for France. Several generations of Turcottes had lived secure and prosperous in America since their ancestors had fled for their lives from Europe. And after all, Armand had enlisted and died in an arm of the United States.

But I knew how jealously the Huguenots around here had clung to tradition. Very well, let them; and let Armand have his memorial. Armand Turcotte? Until now his image had been fairly plain in memory; presently it wavered and blurred, the face drawn and pale, the eyes burning and sad, the fingers long and sensitive. Get the point? In comparison, Armand and Francois merged into one, in a fashion. Damn that ivory cvarver, why couldn't I omit his plight . . . hold everything. I might be able to use François!

"How much did they pay you for the story?" It was a risky approach. I'd read about the fabulous figures paid by Hollywood on occasion and after all, Bayle's drawing account isn't unlimited.

"We did not bargain," she replied grandly. "I told him what the memorial would cost and he agreed to the figure readily."

Readily, huh? Damned well he might, the price of one stone bench for the leading movie story of the year? "The miserable, swindler," I exploded. "Do you happen to know what is paid for a good story there? Ten times that. He took advantage of your evident need of money. And you receive merely a public seat for kids to scrape feet on, for drunks and bums to spend nights on. What a cheap memorial for Armand Turcotte—scarcely better than nothing at all!"

SHE shrank away as though I'd sfruck her, but I let the idea sin kin, feeling like a skunk. She nearly folded, making it an empty victory for me. But Madame must be conditioned, so I paced the kitchen, waiting for the strategic moment, my guns all primed for it now. "You should have something really beautiful and appropriate," I ventured.

"Yes?"

"Big enough to fill the eye, to stand there years after we're gone. On it people should read, "Armand Turcotte who gave his life for his Country" and how about his likeness chiselled on the upright slab in profile, with the wording below it? Something useful if you desire, Madame, another fountain, a birdbath, wadingpool for children. One that would show up other memorials. But this bench in a park, bah!"

"And what would this cost?"

"Search me, but I'll pay it in return for the fan."

"But that fan can not be sold. I told you that. Besides, I promised that agent the use of it for the openings." She was firm about it.

"Listen to me," I declared. "Go back to your hoe, I'll steal the fan. You will not be selling it, I shall steal it anyway, who are you to prevent me? As for your deal with the movie sharks, you don't owe them a cent. Why, they're laughing at you for spilling them a prime story for pin money; now get the last laugh on them. Give them a fan to exhibit, that's all they require. Give it. They wouldn't know the difference."

Conflicting emotions warped the wrinkled old features. I tried to follow

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the workings of her mind, but there wasn't a chance for her sense of values lay beyond me and she was a woman. God only knows how a woman reasons.

She kept me in suspense. Sweat tickled the back of my neck as it does in a crisis. If she turned me down flat, I could seize the fan and she couldn't stop me. But what of François? For he was in this affair to stay and I had committed myself.

I should have know she'd leap all the hurdles. "Where could I get such a fan?" she posed. "It cannot be simply any fan, it must have the same carvings and the unfinished stick."

At that, I poured all my cargo into one hold, frail though I knew it was. I went overboard. I told her about François in the

big city and I fear I gave him a remarkable likeness to Armand to get her sympathy. I retailed his infirmity, skill, loneliness, pride, in that hateful cage, in squalid lodgings. The old girl was ready to bite her nails when I finished. Remember, François was French and he was an ivory carver.

"He can carve you your sticks," I reacted. "He is making many right now. Bring him here: let him work, be kind to him, bring in friends to meet him. See that he becomes recognized for his skill. Do for him what you would have wished folks to do for Armand if he'd been crippled and alone and unhappy."

Man oh man, did she respond to that slant! Once I got François in under her wing, I needn't worry over the matter of international good will in the case.

I threw in the clincher. "Remember, Madame Turcotte, I pay for the memorial. Keep the movie money. Feed that boy. He needs it. And you can have the leaf of the fan which would be very hard to duplicate. But the sticks are mine. Agreed?"

I swear I overheard her old voice cracking in a tune as she returned to her garden and I went the other way into her well-remembered parlor. I got the fan.

NOONTIME, I was back in New York by plane, putting the fan in Bayle's safe keeping lest I damage it. Then to the waterfront and organized my unsavory gang of friends who can make Rance's outfit look like milksops. By mid afternoon I entered the theatre lobby and spotted here and there the men I'd enlisted. I had one cab cruising round the block. It was time for the curtain raiser. I gave the signal. All hell broke loose.

Woman screamed, men cuffed one another, more and more of them kicked and shoved. Something heavy struck the glass cage and opened a crack in it. Attendants were plowing in when the shrill police whistle sounded. Good. Things were coming my way and this would end the cage. I saw François in there, taut and terrified; Madame would have much to undo. She was equal to it.

This was the moment to ease up and take François away. I signalled my men to close in tighter. Then I saw Rance before he did me. A flying tackle removed him. Meantime another brawl went unnoticed. Rance started to get up, the force of a mule concentrated in my right leg. He was too low down for fists and there he remained.

In the door of the smashed cage I got François. He was too dazed to act, so I swept all the ivory and all into a box, hustled him to the cab and away. I got his dunnage out of his rooms next and so help me we were aboard a Boston train before he got his bearings. My second trip there in twenty-four hours. I had telegraphed her to meet us, determined to make it back aboard ship before the *Edgemont* was due to sail.

No doubt Harden Bayle fairly burst with satisfaction when the movie opening came and the "genuine" fan was waved before the audience by that glamorous star. However, my satisfaction out of the whole affair was, I believe, more than that. I had told Madame that I'd pay for the memorial and she had trusted my word for it. That was very gratifying.

There remained only one fly in the ointment: Suppose Francois should not turn out to be a Huguenot? What then?

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Beyond the Brooks

Part III

THE STORY SO FAR

By

BERTRAND SHURTLEFF

WHEN Trueman and Sedgewick had come back from the war, they kept with them their two army dogs—Huskie and Spareribs. Now, partners in an Alaskan gold project, they felt their dogs would fit very well into their new Northern life.

The Brooks were a forbidable mountain barrier to the northward, people spoke of "beyond the Brooks" as one would say "back of beyond," but Trueman and Sedgewick were to know them only too well. For while they rested in the town of Chandalar where Sedgewick was recuperating from a leg wound, their dogs were stolen by Pierre LeMoine, a halfbreed fugitive who had escaped the custody of the Mounted, crossed the border to Alaska and disappeared to the northward driving the hapless dogs with great cruelty, knowing that capture meant a murder charge.

Trueman trails LeMoine over desperately harsh country while a member of the Mounted and a United States marshal are also on his track. They use a plane in the search but though Trueman once catches up with LeMoine, they lose him again in the trackless muskeg. He gives them the slip as completely as though an avalanche had driven down and buried him. But no avalanche had taken him. His own cunning carried him and the suffering dogs over endless trails. Then his rifle is damaged and he murders an Eskimo fisherman to steal another. This murder is discovered by the United States marshal and Corporal Dunbar of the R. C. M. P., and they follow closely—together, since they freely admit they don't know on which side of the border they are operating. They impress some natives to act as guides—as expiation for having broken game laws and killed musk-oxen—and once more take to LeMoine's devious trail; signs have told them that he still has the two stolen dogs—Huskie and Spareribs.

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XV

A Plane Above Him, the Law on His Trail, Still the Fugitive Fled on into the Grim North

"I HAVE a hunch," said Sedgewick, pushing back the papers he had been studying.

Trueman sighed, uncrossed his legs, and turned his head without lowering the arms from where they fanned out like wings from the hands folded at the back curve of his skull.

"About getting back to our claim?" he asked indifferently.

"About getting back our dogs," said Sedgewick.

Trueman brought his arms down quickly and lost his air of indolence in eager inquiry.

"What is it? Where are they? How do we get 'em back?"

Sedgewick grinned tantalizingly, tossing back his blond curls in a characteristic gesture.

"For a guy who called them a couple of worthless mutts, you're mighty eager," he drawled. Then, as Trueman's scowl deepened, "But I've got only a hunch. I'm not reading the cards nor a ouija board. I just figure maybe we could be useful right now. I sort of feel it in my bones."

Trueman spat disdainfully and went back to his ruminating on the landscape, which he had been doing constantly for days while his partner pored over working plans for opening their claim when weather would permit planes to carry them in and land their supplies on the frozen muskeg near the foothills.

"I've got a sensitive skeleton, too," he groused, "but it isn't giving out."

"Maybe it's just wishful thinking," admitted Sedgewick, sighing and pushing his hand through his touseled hair.

"Or this waiting, waiting, waiting—and doing nothing," growled Trueman. "I'm slowly goin' nuts. When I think of them dogs—"

"Or maybe of Dunbar and the marshal up there doing the job for us?"

"Okay, okay, so I figgered we'd let them track our man down for us. They got to because he's a murderer and it's their job. But we look fine chasin' around riskin' our lives to bring home a couple of— Aw what's the hunch?"

"Maybe we could help out if we could

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charter an amphib and do some scouting for 'em. They lost his trail and shoved to the coast to see if they couldn't get word of his being sighted somewhere. We got tired trying to sight him ourselves, but I've been thinking we should have pushed around and done some asking ourselves. Afoot, they'll be weeks and maybe months covering what we could have done in hours, or days at the most."

"So—?" The question in the tone was definitely belligerent.

"So we can maybe cut their leg work by flying—and maybe get our dogs back in time to feed them up and get them in shape for hauling supplies from our landing field to the mine."

He secretly would be delighted to have the animals back, even if they were useless in the winter work, but he had to add that angle to mollify Trueman. His partner wanted those dogs back just as much for sentimental reasons as he did himself, but the grouser insisted on not being made to appear ridiculous in the eyes of others who would scoff at their spending so much time and money seeking two mongrels.

"Trouble with that plane was lack of landing fields," he went on hurriedly.

"He could use pontoons," Trueman growled. "Told me so. Skis too. Handy-cusses, them bush-hoppin' pilots."

"Then we can probably get him to take us back. We can land in quiet coves and bays along the shore, find out if they're making any progress, offer to give them a hand. I have the feeling they're closing in."

"Maybe fly 'em supplies again, if they're low."

"Yeah," catching at any straw that would save Trueman's face and make their trip seem logical, "they may be running low again. It's a long way between eating stops up yonder and sometimes supplies run low even in the posts. Unexpected visitors, or a shift of ice that prevents a supply ship getting through."

"It's no country for human beings," grumbled Trueman. "Let the seals and the polar bears have it. Once we get enough gold out of that claim—"

Sedgewick smiled to himself, aware that Trueman, like so many others, would keep raising his estimates of how much gold was enough, once they started taking out the yellow stuff in quantity and had a stamper and possibly a smelter operating up there within the Arctic Circle. But he was content to let time settle that. Now he wanted to utilize their weary waiting time to get back for another try at locating LeMoine and the captive dogs.

He had done all that he could here for the time being. Estimates had been made and checked and rechecked. Orders had gone out to companies in the States. Machinery was already shipped and on its way. Workers were signed. Food, fuel, and all the creature comforts they planned to fly into the camp to make life bearable to men working for even these exorbitant wages were coming.

But there was nothing left for the two owners to do but wait for the waning summer to pass and snow and frost to turn the tundra near the claim into a perfect landing field on which to dump their mountain of supplies.

Once the cold weather locked that region in its embrace, they would be driven frantic with the million and one jobs to be done and details to keep checked, but they could do nothing further now except recheck again and wait, and wait, and wait.

BOTH men were able to walk again, although Sedgewick was warned to take things easier than usual for some months. Trueman's head had healed too, and he had recovered completely from his ordeal.

The plane came with clumsy-looking pontoons attached, and soared away over the mountains with them. A sheltered bay near a single rambling cabin was their first stop.

"Sure dey vas here," grinned the Scandinavian trader when they questioned him. "Vent close to a hunnert mile wes'. Foun' not'in'. Bought a boat an' outboord off me und vent eas'. Las' heard of 'em." Then he grinned again and added, "But shut off your motor anyvhere over yon'er—und you hear dem."

They took off with fresh hope. Such a rig would be easy to find from the air. The wake of an outboard motor would be as easy to spot as the tail of a comet. A swoop down for closer view would reveal if it was an Eskimo skin boat or the dory the trader had sold the corporal. Some other trader might be out riding in a similar dory, but

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they could easily land on water safe for the boat and investigate.

The weather aided them. Fog hung far to the northward beyond the strip of open sea which gleamed like a hand-hammered blue plate below them, but the land was free of mist back to where a similar fog hung over the glaciers on the upper reaches of the mountains. An Eskimo occasionally waved at them from beside his summer barrow, his miserable-looking dogs barking and howling, his fat wife and eager children running to stare. But most of the time they roared onward without seeing any sign of humanity.

Whales sported in the open water between the distant ice floes and the shore. Seals lifted their heads on the shore or slept peacefully in the blue. A herd of walruses dived and wallowed in the shallower water of a mud or sand bar that was probably well supplied with clams, their favorite food.

Then Trueman nudged Sedgewick, who touched their pilot and pointed. Far ahead a foaming V trailed across a calm bay from a dot pushing rapidly westward.

They banked and went swooping down. Eager eyes noted that the vessel was a dory, painted as the Scandinavian had described it, and driven by a roaring outboard. But closer inspection revealed four figures in the boat, an Eskimo woman at the tiller, a hulking Eskimo man amidship, and two beaming youngsters wedged into the bow.

Wondering how the party had come by the boat that Dunbar had bought, they landed and taxied across the bow of the craft.

The woman screamed and waved them away, careening the boat dangerously as she veered wide without slackening her pace. The man scowled sullenly. The boy would have scrambled aft to do something, but the man restrained him with a lifted hand.

"I don't like their looks," murmured Trueman. "I want to talk to 'em."

He had fumbled for a rifle as they dropped toward the sea. Now he had it in readiness. At the nod of agreement from Sedgewick, he sent a bullet whining across the bow of the darting dory.

The occupants of the boat had evidently had experience enough with white men to understand the meaning of that warning shot. Again the boat veered in a wide arc, still tipping precariously, still keeping up its roaring speed. But this time the hand was not raised as the boy scrambled back past the sullen man in the center and killed the motor for his worried mother.

The plane taxied nearer, the rifle in plain sight.

"Where you get boat?" demanded their pilot.

"White man give," beamed the woman, scorning the accusing stare of the man amidships.

"Where white man now?"

"Far way up river."

She jerked her chin to indicate eastward and south. Then she became unusually voluble for an Eskimo woman.

"Injun man come kill my man. Injun man run way. White mans hunt Injun. Him walk. Boat no good. Me no man. Give boat. Me catchum man."

She jerked her chin again in the direction of the scowling figure in the center of her boat.

"Doesn't look as if she got a bargain," grumbled Trueman, "but I'd want more than a dory and an outboard motor thrown in to take his place. See if you can find out just where they went."

The pilot asked again and scowled at her explanations. Then he explained.

"Remember that barrow we just passed where we couldn't raise anybody? Up the creek that flowed into the sea there. Up where the white water comes into the muskeg. But it was weeks ago. The Indian was heading east along the foothills—with two dogs."

"That's our man. They picked up his trail at last. The dogs're alive, True."

"He's had plenty of time to eat 'em since," Trueman reminded him. "Where does your hunch take us now? Stick to the shore or slide inland?"

Sedgewick had the answer ready.

"There are no trading posts inland along here. No natives live in either foothills or mountains. They live along the coast, as we know. If either LeMoine or the officers should run short of grub they'd cut for the coast. The best bet is to inquire at every post we can find along the shore. Failing there, we'll cut inland and have a look." Then he added ruefully, "But looking for

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men isn't going to be as easy as spotting that dory."

SHORTLY afterward they sighted an Eskimo village, but only the straining dogs at their posts, yapping defiance, and a single old crone gave sign of welcome.

Then Trueman nudged and pointed again. Ahead of them to the eastward was an unmistakable trading post, with figures mobbed around it like bees about to leave their hive and swarm.

They slid down expectantly. Excited natives were feasting and dancing, many of them dressed in their gala best. A white-haired man who must be the factor, was waving his pipe in welcome, his face beaming.

"Busier nor Glasgow," he greeted them. "Folk comin' and gaein' a' the time. Did ye no see my lost visitors as ye cam' doon?"

"Corporal Dunbar and the U. S. marshal?" asked Sedgewick quickly.

"Dunbar it were, an' a mon he ca'ed his deppity."

"With a prisoner?"

"Nae, but wi' found hope o' owertakin' him soon."

They demanded and received more explicit information. Sedgewick gave Trueman a triumphant wink.

"The old hunch worked, keed. Old Reliable, that's me. Call 'em every time. We're closing in for the kill. We'll be there with bells on."

"Does the hunch tell you if there's a ready-made landin' field, or do you bail out and make one for us while we loaf around topside and wait?" inquired Trueman scornfully.

"The crystal is a trifle cloudy. All this fog," grinned Sedgewick. "But we can take a quick look without losing much time. No field, no landing party. Zip back here and gallop overland afoot to be in at the finish. If we spot him, gauge his line of flight and try to find enough water for us to set down ahead of him and herd him back. Okay?"

"You took command when you hunched us up over the mountains. Keep right on drawing the plans. It's your chin I see sticking out."

"Could be my chest—waiting for the brilliant ribbons."

"Could be your back—inviting approving slaps. Leave us depart, stick-pusher. We want in at the end."

There was a slight delay for refueling. Then they were off. The factor had been able to give them the approximate location of the slaughter scene. Knowing the Eskimo hunters, he explained that they had departed in as straight a line as they could make across the country. Finding them would be a simple matter from the air, since they would not hide at the first sound of a motor, as the fleeing renegade would.

Minutes later they saw the little party picking its way down a rocky grade, still heading in the direction indicated by the factor. Looking back from their elevation, high above the land, they could see the post directly behind the moving figures.

Dropping down they went close enough to let the officers identify them and climbed slightly to circle.

"What's next, Skipper?" asked Trueman, saluting mockingly.

"Four dead oxen, a halfbreed and two dogs. We should be able to spot the oxen, even if the others hide. LeMoine couldn't tuck them out of sight—and we'll be on him unexpectedly, before he can cover them with camouflage. Fly low, and keep our eyes peeled. Take a sneak look before he even hears us."

"Too bad MacArthur overlooked your powers," jeered Trueman, "or they could've saved that atom bomb for bigger fish. You've scored twice runnin', but them hunches don't keep clickin' forever."

"There is still a little mist over the crystal ball," countered Sedgewick, "but I seem to see a scowling face with dark eyebrows looking more like a sheep than usual."

"Maybe a black sheep," grunted Trueman, "but don't try pulling that black wool over his eyes. Better look for muskox wool in four bales."

"I see only three," called Sedgewick excitedly, "but that mess close by may be the skinned body of the fourth. There's LeMoine ducking for shelter, hauling the dogs after him. See! See there?"

It was true. The plane had glided over the continuation of the ridge the renegade had topped in sighting the kill. Below them as they swept onward a man was vainly trying to make two wildly excited dogs stop their capering and lie down beside him in

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the rocks that might have concealed the three of them if he could have acted minutes sooner.

XVI

LEMOINE had slept on his grandiose ideas that grew from frightening the hunters away so easily and acquiring in one bold stroke enough meat and hides for security against the coming winter cold and hunger. But the fear that drives a hunted man returned as the elation died. Those men he had frightened away might reconsider and return. They might bring their tribesmen with them and surround him, driven by their hunger and the knowledge of all that meat waiting to be taken by force. They might even report to the authorities, although he doubted that, because such a report would involve their confessing the kill.

Then he shuddered at another possibility. They might run to the authorities and report his presence, covering their own culpability by accusing him of the slaughter.

This last thought drove away his plans to scour the country for dogs and possibly women to act as carriers. He might be lucky to get away with a whole skin and enough meat to last him to his next kill.

Frantically he stripped the hide off one of the oxen and pegged it to dry. He dared not wait much longer to add to his wardrobe, since the cold would begin soon. That hide would be priceless when the frosts grew fiercer with the coming of the long night.

Then he sliced more and more meat from the carcass, spreading it to dry on the rocks heated by the waning light of the sun. Pulling their muzzles tight, after letting the dogs eat their fill, he could doze and rest and recuperate from the hardships of the trail, while the animals nosed about among the drying meat and the bodies of the oxen or lay down to sleep themselves and let their cracked pads heal and weary muscles rejuvenate with rest and food.

The dogs aroused from time to time to warn that the wolves were sneaking back, but a wave and a shout sent the prowlers scurrying for distant cover. The sun still gave warmth enough to keep him drowsy, even if it was not hot enough to dry his meat as quickly and as thoroughly as he might wish. A man traveling the woods and the wilds was accustomed to wiping off the blue mold before devouring the meat on which it had formed. He would not die of that, even if a city dweller might turn up his nose and consider the fare unfit for human consumption.

With the warning of the dogs to keep him alerted if danger approached, he felt secure again. The warmth and rest made him lazy. He basked in the welcome sunshine, counting himself lucky to have this opportunity to prepare himself and the dogs for the grueling trail that still lay ahead.

While he dozed, he mapped his future plans. There were vast wastes still left in this wild country where even Eskimo and Indian trappers had not penetrated to strip the wilds of fur. He would find such a spot and trap during the cold months. Then he would slip out to the post of some independent trader and swap furs for necessary shells, tobacco, and other refinements. Failing in his trapping, he could hide out near such a post and rob the more successful trappers when they came back from trading.

A man who could escape from the Mounties need not fear pursuit from anybody. By traveling fast and far after each raid, he could remain undetected for years, build himself a reserve for his old age, slip quietly into some little settlement and live out the remaining years of his life as a successful trapper and voyageur come back to civilization to rest.

Then the dogs gave warning again. LeMoine jumped up to wave, but saw no slinking wolves. The dogs pointed at the ridge to the northward. Perhaps the hunters had come back and were crawling to the top of the ridge to peer over, even as he had peered from a more western spot on the high land when he heard their shots.

Even as he scowled and searched that skyline for a lifting head, his rifle ready for a quick shot at the first sign of life, he caught the sound that had alerted the dogs. A roar of motors, reflected upward previously by the ridge until the plane was all but over the edge and in sight, warned him. Too late he saw the plane come sweeping over the rim.

With an angry oath he leaped for the restraining leash and tried to tug the dogs

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to earth. Their masters could have dropped them instantly with a sharp command, for they had known perfect obedience when such a plane might mean bombs and destruction. But they defied this man at every possibility and frisked about gaily now, heads up, tails waving like plumes, bodies gyrating with excitement.

Before he could cow them and get them quiet, the plane had swung and come back. He could see two faces peering over intently, studying the location carefully, while another risked momentary glimpses as the plane banked.

He was tempted to snap a shot or two at them and half lifted his rifle to try it, but realized that their speed and the distance made accurate shooting almost impossible. Besides, firing would assure them that he was guilty.

He could not identify the faces at that height. He had no idea the two men he had robbed back in Chandalar were so close. These must be Game Wardens that had heard a distorted story from the Eskimos and had come to investigate.

The punishment for shooting muskoxen would be nothing compared to the charge of murder, but he knew that his arrest on a minor infraction would bring all his other crimes pressing down upon him. He must evade these men.

When the plane swept away to the southward and eastward, climbing again, he felt a little easier. Perhaps they sought a place to land their plane to come after him afoot.

He grinned at that. Even though the plane was equipped with pontoons for landing on water, there was nothing resembling a suitable lake anywhere for miles and miles behind him, and he felt certain there was no such stretch ahead. The plane might give its occupants an advantage over a man escaping afoot, especially in viewing him, but it was handicapped in turn by being unable to land except in special places. No such level strips appeared naturally in this land, except muskegs, which would trip a plan and inevitably send it tumbling end over end.

Even their advantage of spying on him would be greatly lessened when they returned. The next time there would be no carcasses of dead muskoxen to lead them to him. He would be too alert for the sound of their motors to show movement while they were within sight.

Drowning his panic in these thoughts, he hastily gathered the partially dried meat and made it into three packs. Regretfully, he decided that the stiffening hide was still too heavy and cumbersome to carry. The danger that the men in the plane would send land parties after him made lighter travel imperative.

The plane came sweeping back by the time he had hurriedly packed. He could still see three occupants, so they had found no field or water on which to land and leave any of their number. The country was open to him ahead.

But he had been heading eastward along the foothills. They might have heard by now of the missing fisherman and roughly plotted his line of travel from that spot. If they connected him with both these breaches of the law, that Mountie might be after him.

Then he grinned his gap-toothed smile again at his own astuteness and headed directly south.

They thought they had the old fox trapped, knew his line of travel, could trap or waylay him by getting ahead of him and cutting him off, probably sending others to bay at him from behind and frighten him onward to the snare. But he would fool them. He was too crafty to be lured or driven like an animal. Somewhere to the eastward lay rivers on which the plane could land and disgorge men to hunt for him, possibly lakes that would serve as landings too. But those mountains where the mists hung almost constantly would afford the searchers no sight of him from the air, no possible landing places. Under those mists the going might be slower, but any party following him afoot would not have the scouting of the plane to aid them.

He started straight east, after making sure the plane was out of sight. Then he turned at right angles, taking care he and the dogs had left prints in the softer earth to show they were heading eastward, and picked his way carefully on rocks and ledges to the south.

Unaware that a land party was already much closer than he dreamed, he did not hurry at first, but took great pains to keep the dogs from rubbing against any rock that might retain a few hairs of their fur for

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tracking eyes to detect or from stepping between the rocks anywhere and leaving a paw mark in the dirt. When they did, he would go back and brush the earth level again, taking care to turn back each little stone that had been dislodged, for fear keen eyes would detect their passing.

Then he stopped to look back from the top of a foothill he had been forced to climb to evade a muskeg. Instantly he cowered, hugging down against the rocks, looking quickly behind him to make sure the towering mountains had kept him from being sharply outlined against the sky. For he had sighted his pursuers. Tiny insect-like forms were crawling toward the site of the slaughter, strung out like ants in a single file moving toward a reported discovery of food.

Fear galloped his pulses. He swore fiercely and fluently at what he termed his luck. He caught himself clattering his rifle against the rocks in a panic of frustration, but halted himself as he realized the situation he would be in if he damaged the weapon.

With this he could hold them off. If they came much closer, he could slow them with a few well-placed shots, perhaps thin their numbers, show them it was not safe to hound Pierre LeMoine across the country like a fox.

HE TURNED and slid down the far side of the hill, his confidence returning as he scrambled along. This was no time to try to hide his trail. If he could keep out of sight and put miles behind him before they determined which way he had turned, he might yet get enough ahead to renew concealing tactics. But now he must drive for all he was worth to lose himself in the hills with their blanket of mists before the accursed plane swept back to spot his movements and direct the pursuers.

He was thankful that he had rested himself and the dogs instead of seeking other carriers. If he had carried out his first plan to raid some village for its dogs and women, he would have been caught in the act. He might be scantily supplied as yet for the cold ahead, but he was still alive and free.

The fear of losing both freedom and life drove him. He scrambled along at a fierce pace, in spite of the difficulties as he climbed. Twice he had to halt and loosen the muzzles to allow more play of those lolling tongues as the dogs panted and gasped and struggled along with him.

He wound around a steeper hill that hid him from the party that had slowed at the low ridge and was creeping out in a cautious ring to surround the sprawled bodies of the oxen. Just before he drove still deeper into the mountains, he took a reassuring survey of the country behind, careful not to expose more than an eye in the effort.

For a full minute he watched and chuckled. The fools were wasting valuable time surrounding a nest from which their quarry had flown. Every minute that they spent there gave him time to press deeper into the hills, devise more elaborate plans to throw them off the trail.

Tethering his dogs, he went up a yawning ravine, kicking over stones carelessly as he went. Then he back-tracked carefully, took the dogs in tow, and plunged off in another direction.

A careful study of the terrain from the hill had shown him a gash slicing westward up the ridge, disappearing in clouds somewhere short of the top. Now he carefully directed the dogs to the ravine and started climbing.

The going was hard. At times he had to boost the dogs up some leap they could not negotiate with their packs. Twice he had to haul them up, floundering and kicking as they scrambled for footing. Once he had to make a wide detour to find sufficient grip for his own fingers and toes.

Yet they climbed steadily, driven by his fear of being overtaken. The mists were curling not very far above them now, lifting on a faint breath of air, swirling, swooping low again. When they lifted he cursed, and when they came down again he blessed the saints, but always he climbed and urged his dogs upward.

Huskie and Spareribs panted until their ribs were bellows. Their bodies shook from head to pendulous tail with every gasping inhalation. Toes strained and scratched for footing. Pads wore thin again under the sandpapering of the scramble over cruel surfaces.

But he could not stop without inviting disaster. The men below were determined to have him this time.

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Then he heard the plane.

This time it could not sneak up on him, its noise deflected and hurled far over his head. The towering walls behind him were a perfect sounding board now, catching the roar and hurling it down at him long before he could discern the speck that was the plane where it again came skimming low over the flat country to attempt sneaking upon him again before he could huddle down and hide with the dogs.

But hiding was no real effort here. He was all but invisible except from straight above, being deep in a ravine where the shadows were dark. The dogs needed no snarling threats to haul them down now. Sheer exhaustion and the weight of their loads forced them to slump down and pant the instant his eternal urging ceased.

HE LAUGHED as the plane swept around and around like a dog that has lost the scent and must circle with nose to earth to pick it up again. It ranged far to the eastward, swooping low as if to examine every possible hiding place, lifting to skim over the neighboring foothills, reeling far away and coming charging back again for more maneuvering.

He had seen hawks and eagles sweep the sky in this fashion, but he knew that this mighty bird had no such eyes as those killers boasted. If he and the dogs remained motionless in the deep shadows, they were safe.

Eventually the plane swung away to the northward again, plainly frustrated in its efforts to find the quarry. Noting how hard the dogs still panted and how their eyes begged for a little more rest, he slid off his own pack, left his rifle with the dogs, and crawled slowly and carefully up the rocks that cut off his view from the men afoot.

Still being extremely cautious to keep from exposing himself, he watched and studied every fresh exposure of the terrain as he advanced one eye gingerly around the edge of the rock. Then his grin re-asserted itself. In spite of the climbing, he had gained on them. They had just closed on the scene of the slaughter and were evidently holding some kind of discussion around the kill.

But the mists above him were uncertain. He could not count on being concealed every time the spying plane swept over. He must shove deeper into the hills, gain the perpetual mists, or sink himself somewhere so far off his previous line of flight that the searchers in the plane would never find him.

Then his ravine pinched out in an insurmountable wall.

His elation left him. Wild curses turned the air blue. He beat the rocks with his bare hands until the pain stopped and sobered him.

Twice he found branch ravines and started up them, but both ended as did the first he had followed. Reluctantly he faced the necessity of retreating or scaling the easier wall from which he had just spied on the pursuers and trying to climb up the very ridge itself.

This meant possibly exposing himself to view from below, but it was the more tempting, even then. Going back meant losing hours that he had gained at such an expenditure of energy.

Cursing a country where no night came at regular intervals to hide a man, or at such long intervals as to be utterly useless to him now, he dragged the dogs upward. They flinched and whined and protested, but he tugged and hoisted.

Finally they reached the ridge and worked up it toward the mountain. He could still see the tiny specks far below him, scurrying around now on his trail. For a long time they held eastward, tricked by his ruse, and he chuckled as he watched. But when they halted and began to look about inquiringly, studying the rising foothills and even the distant slopes, he held the dogs down and cowered himself.

The shadow of the mountain hid him, blended him into the deep purple of the dip behind him. His lack of movement made him indiscernible, even though he was outlined on the very edge of the ridge.

He watched as the men far below and beyond him cast about for his trail. He noted that only two were left. The others were almost out of sight to the northward, returning to the post or the village.

Not until the searchers below him were hidden from him by a foothill as they finally made some discovery that led them southward, or decided to climb one of the foothills to study the surrounding country for some sight of him in flight, did he move.

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Then he bent far forward under his pack, crawling like some hump-backed mountain goat, and drew the moaning dogs after him up the crest.

His own feet were growing sore from the sharp edges of the rocks on which he trod with his worn moccasins, but he had no mercy on himself or the protesting dogs. Fear of the noose drove him. Beyond this range lay the freedom that he sought so frantically.

Many a wiser man than he might have given up rather than attempt to penetrate those mountains so poorly equipped. He had barely enough food for himself and the dogs for two or three weeks. His clothing would never protect him from the bitter cold ahead. Moccasins were scarcely more than rags lacerated by sharp stones into mere strips.

But his magnificent conceit carried him on. Confidence far outweighed reason. Hardships might await him in this wilderness waste, but he had an unbounding faith in his own ability. The men behind him would perish in the hills, he felt sure, once winter struck. Even with the plane to come and drop them supplies, they would be unable to survive. But his luck would bring him an opportunity to rob some unsuspecting traveler, perhaps a trapper buried in what he thought was seclusion for the winter.

Then another idea flashed into his wildly racing mind as he continued to crawl along the edge of that towering ridge to gain the even higher mountain beyond it. He might eventually circle and ambush his pursuers, steal their supplies and the winter clothing the plane would be sure to drop for them, leave them to freeze or starve while he went exultantly on his way, rid of them at last.

He reached the mountainside and saw a way winding westward around the barren rocky shoulder. Quickly he stumbled along it, hauling the reluctant dogs after him.

Mist enshrouded them in a weird swirling drapery. Everything above them was shut out in gray, leaving only the depths below vaguely visible as the fog slid noiselessly lower and lower, until even the valleys behind and before were blanketed with a gloom far more difficult to penetrate with the vision than the deep purple shadows customarily lying there at this season of approaching twilight.

LeMoine cackled with delight and tugged harder at the leash.

"My luck she come," he exulted. "Like I'm tol' you before. Nobody can beat Pierre LeMoine. I'm win t'rough yet."

XVII

"HUNCH me one more hunch," pleaded Trueman tauntingly. "I'll forever idolize you as the blond god of forecasting, Sedge, my boy, if you'll just hunch me enough of a hunch to set me down right within rifle range of that dog-stealing murdering halfbreed."

Sedgewick was scowling now. They had sighted the renegade just as the law was closing in and had evidently frightened him into a precipitous flight. The man should have been too terrified to play crafty and hide his trail. A normal renegade who had been through such a grueling flight would have been glad to surrender. Only the craftiest would have presence of mind enough to hide his trail, even as he fled from the very muzzles of pursuing rifles.

But this man they sought had disappeared as successfully as though he had resorted to a magic vanishing trick. The rocks seemed to have swallowed him and the dogs. Their most careful sweeps of the country failed to reveal any sign of him, although much of the land here afforded poor cover for anybody seeking to hide himself and two active dogs.

Then the fog had come again, as if the wily rascal had some way of invoking it when he became most desperate.

Sedgewick tried to tell himself that the weather was only typical of the country, but the feeling still persisted that this reckless marauder was too lucky for the law ever to nab him.

"True," he said soberly, "I'd give half of my half of that claim if I could do just what you ask. I have another hunch and I hesitate to mention it because it sounds too much like quitting. I've a strong one that we'll never see him captured. Something tells me—"

"When we're right on top of him like this? Your huncher has laid an egg, Sedge. This time you're out on a limb. The minute

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this fog opens we'll be over him like a conscience. Why, I want Chic Vance to fly us up some chutes so we can go down after the skunk the next time we sight him. Only the extent of this fog will be holding him up."

Those mists that came down from the icy tops of the mountains were not the only fog. A solid bank had swept in from the ice far to the northward, probably heralding the return of the ice floes to the shore. Now it hid everything from view except the things within a few feet of the observer. They could take the plane aloft from the bay, but they dared not risk the chance of missing water on the return and hitting the land or the ice floe that they sensed from the sudden drop of the temperature was closing to the land again.

"I can't risk getting pinched out of take-off water," warned the pilot. "I'm hiring Eskimos to watch for incoming ice when I sleep. If the floe starts coming into the cove, I climb and head for parts south."

He need not have hired the lookouts. The ice came while they slept two nights later, but it announced its coming in grinding and crashing and booming, long before it could be sighted by anybody in the cove, as it crunched and bumped and piled up and fell on the jutting points beyond.

"I've been talking with the factor," said Sedgewick, when the pilot awakened him to tell him what was coming. "Can't we shift our base of operations to the Mackenzie or the Porcupine until freeze-up makes the muskegs perfect landing places for skis? If this fog doesn't reach that far, there should be water enough for landing and taking off on either of those rivers somewhere near a trading post."

"I was going to suggest we look for some thing like that. Those guys up back will be needing supplies. I hate to run out on 'em."

"The factor is sending Eskimos to follow them with all they'll need for now. They'll easily overtake them, for they're finding it slow going along that tricky trail LeMoine left. I'm thinking more of being around to spot the cuss from the air, once this fog opens, and dropping ahead of him by chute to cut off his escape."

The pilot's eyes narrowed as he studied the former officer.

"Ever jump?" he asked.

"In New Guinea—in terrain every bit as bad as this, although much hotter. With those same dogs we're hunting now," he added with a grimness that was not lost on the pilot. "Went in after some important aviation officers that had been shot down."

The pilot whistled softly.

"I had a whack at flying the hump in the Burma campaign," he said. "I'll do my best. If I can't find you a base, I'll turn you over to some bush-hopper who knows this particular area better. I'm really less acquainted up here than some."

DEAD reckoning sufficed to take them to the great sprawling delta of the Mackenzie, but they saw nothing of the meandering branches that split up the stream over a hundred miles from the sea. Everything was shrouded completely in a mighty robe of fog that seemed to stretch away forever over the earth.

"Looks as if it'll have to be the Porcupine," called the pilot. "Hope it's open."

Time seemed to stand still while they slid over the top of the fog blanket, which stretched away in billowing waves below them, lifting at times to envelop mountains, dipping somewhat into the valleys. They picked up the river at last by the density of the mists over its winding course, but such open spots as they saw beneath them were too rapid for safe landing or showed no signs of habitation near.

No promise showed until they were over Yukon Flats, where an island-dotted expanse of open water like a long meandering lake stretched away interminably both down and up the Yukon River, with Fort Yukon sprawled before them like a doll city at the wide junction of the rivers.

"Look, Sedge," said Trueman, looking even tougher in his scowling efforts to appear indifferent, "summer's about over. That ice shoving back to land's a bad sign. Frosts'll start any time."

"The usual thing, I'm told, about this time of year up here."

Trueman ignored the attempted sarcasm and continued, "What I've been thinking is that one of us ought to stick around and try to—well, to help out in the chase. It'll soon be time to start flying stuff to our claim, so maybe—"

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He left the thought unfinished and peered at his partner. Sedgewick caught his meaning.

"Do we toss for it?" he asked. "Either job's no cinch."

"I'm not kiddin' myself who's got the brains between us, Sedge. You made lieutenant and I was still non-com when things ended—and probably would have been for life if they'd kept on shooting until I tripped in my beard and got sent home. I don't feel up to handling things at the claim. Too much head work for me. I can easier step out of a plane and go fly a parasol to cut off that wolverine's escape than I can get things started up there. The figgerin' has all been yours. She's your baby. Time she's able to walk, I may be able to watch that she doesn't fall down, but somebody's got to put her on a workin' formula first and all that. My older sister had kids, and I know how it is. That mine'll be a lot like a baby, I reckon."

"You're cutting yourself a portion of hardtack instead of cake. True, if you go parachuting down from the Northern skies after that fiend."

"Maybe I won't have to. Maybe I'll just go along for the ride. Time this fog lifts, the law might have him cornered, captured, cuffed, and carried out."

Sedgewick faced him squarely.

"I've had a lot of hunches and they've usually turned out to be true," he said soberly. "I've had one more. True, that I haven't told you. I have a strong feeling that nobody will catch LeMoine and bring him to justice." Then he asked after a long pause, "Still want to go?"

Somebody's got to, Sedge. Hunch or no hunch, we can't let them officers down. They'll be needing grub and more grub and plenty of winter gear soon. And I still feel that sometime your luck on those hunches will run out. A guy can't be right forever."

Sedgewick hesitated, staring off to avoid meeting Trueman's eyes. Then he whirled his gaze back at him and stared hard.

"Promise me you won't jump," he begged. "Together it would be tough enough—but alone—"

"It might save months and even years of slow chain', Sedge."

"I can't help it. I want your promise."

"I won't jump unless things look right. How's that?"

"A broken leg—alone—or that ankle sprained again—"

"Aw, quit your worryin'. That mine's your baby, I'm not. I won't jump unless I see half a dozen firemen down there holdin' a net, or a big soft featherbed spread so wide I can't miss it."

"You can do a lot more good from the air, spotting him, especially after snow flies. He can't move then without leaving a trail you can easily locate and follow."

"If there's light enough to follow. But let's not worry about all that. They'll probably grab him before snow. You stay and get things hummin'. I'll shove back up there as soon as she clears."

Two days later he headed north and east again, alone with the pilot this time, but equipped with a parachute in case he saw a favorable opportunity to use it.

EVEN during the slight delay the dusk was noticeable where for weeks all had been so bright under the constant sunshine. Fall was reaching down from that icepack to the north and spreading frosty fingers southward, touching the mountains first and reaching down their sides to strangle everything in ice.

Before they reached the Richardsons and started crossing to look for either their quarry or the officers, they met a solid wall of swirling, driving snow. Dropping in an effort to evade it, they swept along a valley where the snow changed to rain, but the flakes clung to the higher ridges and stuck in a white mass that would not melt before another summer.

They turned back out of sheer necessity, shivering in spite of the warm clothing they had donned in expectation of cold in the higher altitudes they would encounter in hopping mountains.

The next day they met the same snow wall just up the Porcupine, although the Yukon Flats knew only rain as yet.

The third day the weather was clear and they shoved on to try to locate the pursuers and the pursued.

North of the Richardsons they spotted the officers bogged down in the snow that blanketed that entire section clear to the sea. Aware that they must be in need of

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winter clothing and transportation for their supplies, they flew on to the trading post, after waving a greeting.

On the way they spotted two dog teams and three runners streaking south toward the marooned men.

"Aye," the factor greeted them at the post. "They'll have sledge, dogs, blankets, winter clothes, and grub a'most by now. They left orders for a' that. I ken what they're up against. But there's naebody, I hope, to do as much for the wretch they're chasin'. He's nae gude, that un'."

They took on more gas and swung back, determined to pick up the trail of the renegade now that they had his wallowing through soft snow to guide them.

Still assuming that he would strike back to his easterly course as soon as he eluded his pursuers, they headed along the foothills, after dropping a weighted note to tell the officers that their needed supplies were coming overland to them. A deep track, clearly outlined in the shadows that dwindling daylight threw over the snow, led them some miles toward the sea before they saw that they were trailing caribou that had evidently been hiding out in the willows to avoid the ubiquitous mosquitoes' and rifles.

Disappointed, they swung back again, searching that vast expanse of fresh snow for additional tracks.

The almost utter desolation of the great waste was borne in upon Trueman forcibly as he stared for mile after mile without seeing a sign that any large animal had moved across that frosted cake beneath him. The millions of caribou had gone almost as completely as their distant cousins, the bison, had gone from the great prairies far to the south. The hordes of wolves that had followed the caribou were gone, too, as well as the nomadic Indians and Eskimos who fought for the right to hang on the heels of the great movement and cut out the food and clothing they needed to exist in this barren land.

With the caribou gone, the whales depleted from overfishing, and seals and walrus threatening to follow the same route to oblivion, it was no wonder the Canadian government had been forced to import that gigantic herd of reindeer from Alaska. Without this new meat source, the Eskimos would soon follow the caribou into oblivion.

What chance would a man have, alone, ill clothed, underfed, with every other man's hand raised against him, in combatting that dread waste? Sedgewick's latest hunch certainly seemed probable of fulfillment, with LeMoine struggling against such terrific handicaps.

But the resourceful wretch had already done the impossible in escaping from the train and getting this far. The ill-spent courage and determination that he poured out so freely on a lost cause, might somehow take him through this.

The dusk was thick in the hollow below them, but Sedgewick saw the faint markings where some tiny insect had crawled across the powdered sugar on the broad expanse of pastry below them.

"Take her down," he roared at the pilot. "Tracks below."

Then he could see not only tracks, but fleeting little figures far away through the gathering murk of the valley, three figures that fled steadily from the roar of the plane, as if aware it doomed them.

Hope leaped up in him. He swung the rifle in readiness. If this was a man and two dogs, he prayed the man would be LeMoine.

There was brush ahead in the valley. The forms were racing toward the brush as the plane came swooping after them. Trueman's frown deepened as he noted the incredible speed the three were making. If LeMoine could race like that over soft snow he must be one of those werewolves that local legends insisted could be found in the Canadian wilds.

He jerked his rifle through the housing, shuddering in the cold air the sliding panel admitted. The plane banked. Just before the fleeing three entered the brush, he fired.

But even as he caught the trio in his sights, he was sure that all three were canine forms. Either LeMoine was truly capable of turning himself into a wolf, or they had spent time and ammunition on natural wolves.

He made a lucky shot. The leader gave a mighty leap and tumbled, kicking, in the snow. As they swept up and around in a long climb to avoid running into the ridges that closed hard at the end of the valley,

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Trueman saw the two survivors crawling back from the shelter of the bushes they had reached to sniff and slash at their fallen comrade.

"Three wolves, instead of one two-legged one and two dogs," he called. "Take her away."

But no amount of cruising revealed any more tracks through that virgin blanket of white. Nothing larger than a snowshoe rabbit had ventured far.

"Horses have to be fed," called the pilot at last, jerking his chin toward the engine. "Be tough walking after gas. Have to call it a day."

"At least we know he hasn't traveled much since the snowfall," sighed Trueman, climbing stiffly from the plane back at Fort Yukon.

"Not unless he was deeper into the range than we figured," said the pilot. "We spent our time on the flat and the foothills. Maybe he really dug his way into the mountains and is wallowing along one of those valleys."

"If he is, he'll be lucky to come out alive—even if nobody follows him. But we'll grab some sleep and some grub and gas and go look again tomorrow."

BUT winds and fog and finally snow kept them earthbound for three days. They spent some of the time exchanging pontoons for skis, but the rest of the time dragged hopelessly.

"Worse'n waiting for zero hour to take off on a big raid, eh?" grinned the pilot. "But there'll come a day. It's clear once in a while up here, even in the fall and winter. And when it is clear with snow around, brother, wear your blinders."

Trueman appreciated what he meant the next day when they took to the air. The sun hit the snow-covered hills, even though there were shadows in the lowlands and the dips. It reflected fiercely from glittering ice until the black glasses the pilot supplied were a welcome relief. Without them he could have seen nothing below that glare.

But with them he could see little of advantage to them. The pilot headed for the camp of the law officers to orient themselves for the search of the mountains. The Eskimos had come and gone, leaving one sledge. The pursuers were ready for the pursuit, but were uncertain which way to go, since the snow had covered all tracks, and they must depend on the plane to give them the right direction. Sweep after sweep over white peaks seemed to show no sign of life below.

Then Trueman roared and pointed. Something had flicked in a deep cut far beneath him, a mere movement of something gray against all that white. Perhaps only a bird jumping about, a ptarmigan startled into movement by their flight, or a snowshoe rabbit, cowering in hiding because his winter change of fur had not come in time for the early storm and endangered him to the keen eyes of fox or wolf or this strange great wheeling bird of prey over him.

BUT Trueman felt that this was neither. Something told him there was a struggle going on under the faintly vibrating brush in the depths of that valley. Perhaps the moving thing had exposed itself to some hungry prowler on its trail by that twitch of fright that had called his attention to the spot, but he had the feeling that the thing he saw was the sweep of Huskies plumed tail, that the movement was a battle between the eager dog and the terrified LeMoine who was trying to hold him quiet under the brush.

"Down," Trueman called frantically, "down!"

"Sorry, no can do."

The pilot pointed at the walls. Sheer rock seemed to hem in the little scene, except for one gap too narrow for the plane to negotiate safely. They could not get much nearer without risk of crashing.

"Stick around," pleaded Trueman. "Swing as low as you dare. I think I've found 'em."

He opened the slide again as the plane banked low and fought the icy wind that entered, to stick out his head. The tight helmet almost blew from his skull. He felt that his beard would have blown off if he hadn't shaved that morning, or he could have wiped frozen bristles away with his hand.

But he managed to turn his head enough to emit that piercingly shrill whistle that he made by blowing down into the little cup he could create by thrusting out his under-

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slung lower jaw, drawing back his tongue until it ached.

The sound might be lost in the roar of the motor, might never descend into that stone-walled pocket where the movement had taken place. But he knew that either Huskie or Spareribs would recognize it if it did. They had answered that shrill call through rifle and grenade fire, through tropic jungle and frigid cold. They would certainly heed it now, if they heard it even in such surroundings.

Again and again he sent it shrieking down toward the rocks. Then he outdid himself in the loudest blast he had ever emitted.

Gasping from the cold, he slid the window shut and peered again.

Then he almost tore himself loose from the plane at what he saw, lurching against the seat, fighting the restraining safety-belt, pawing at the pilot and the panel at the same time.

"They're there! Our dogs! My Spareribs, the old son of a gun, and Huskie, that old warhorse. They're there. He's fightin' to haul 'em back, but they're there. We've found 'em."

"Yeah, and who's going in after 'em in this weather?" gloomed the pilot. "Any movement on them walls o' rock would likely start an avalanche that would carry the volunteer down in glory to be embalmed in ice until next summer's thaw. Mister, you found more than a peck o' trouble—with that guy and the dogs square in the middle of it."

XVIII

LEMOINE continued to push farther into the hills under cover of the fog. The seemingly tireless energy that he had shown driving northward after his escape from the train carried him on and on.

He scaled walls that sloped sharper than the slant of a houseroof. He hoisted or lowered the protesting dogs, their loads, and his own. He ignored the possibility of running out of food where he could hope to find nothing more nourishing than rock soup—and no fire with which to boil the rocks soft for that.

He was obsessed with a mania for leaving the vaunted Mountie behind. He would show these men that Pierre LeMoine could not be tracked.

When he heard a plane tearing over somewhere above the dense fog, he exulted at his own shrewdness and kept scrambling. He could not know that the fog stretched far southward from the Arctic, that the ice had shoved back to the land, that cold was already nipping the gay flowers that had dared defy Jack Frost on the flats beyond.

He only knew that he was escaping both the men searching for him on the ground and his man-carrying bird cruising over him in an effort to find his trail.

Then snow came.

At first the fog started dropping in a soft mist. Then the mist turned to a chilling rain that grew steadily colder until it threatened to halt him by encasing the ledges in a glare of ice. But the fates that had alternately smiled and frowned on him had something even worse in store for him. Soft snow replaced the rain, blinding, clinging, blanketing snow that buried everything in a deep white overlet.

LeMoine felt that it had come just as he went through the worst of the climbing and descending southward and eastward. Within another twenty-four hours he would have been south of the range and into a country that should have enough brush to offer concealment if the plane sought for him there. He had peered through a rift in the fog only a few hours before and was sure he had seen a long valley far below him, a valley covered with the tiny trees that were known to the Indians as "the little sticks."

But this snow would reveal his trail and bring the accursed plane after him, pointing the way for the men on foot to close on him. The ill luck that had dogged him at every turn was closing in on him at last.

Wet, weary, discouraged, he found some brush in the depths of a rocky ravine and crawled under it to shelter himself and the dogs as best he could from the penetrating dampness of the snow. His clothing was already wet to the skin. He must haul the dogs around him and cuddle between them in order to warm his thoroughly chilled body enough to sleep. Even if he had dared risk a feeble fire from the dead branches of the brush, he doubted if he could have started a flame in the dampness.

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Dozing, resting, waking to eat a few mouthfuls of his diminishing meat or to toss to the dogs a few grudged scraps, he waited for the snow to stop. But when it did cease, a bitter cold swept the hills. Thinly clad as he was, he could easily persuade himself to remain warm and resting for a few hours more. This weather was unseasonable. Winter was not due for weeks. This snow would soon melt under a warm breeze, just as soon as the direction of the wind changed. Then he could negotiate the rest of the descent to the valley far below him without risk of being hurtled down precipitously in a mighty avalanche of his own starting.

Before he slept and the snow covered everything, he had noted that the hillside above his glen was covered with loose rocks that looked as if they had been held in place while the builder backed away at arm's length and released them carefully, not daring to breathe for fear they would come crashing down. Any slight movement might start rocks and snow cascading—and he hesitated to create that movement.

Then the plane came roaring over.

LeMoine hugged the dogs and was congratulating himself on keeping them quiet, when Huskie leaped, thrashed with his tail, fought to free himself from the restraining arm.

There was no room to flail at him with the lash, even if he had been ready, no club except the carefully wrapped rifle, which was under them, no opportunity to kick viciously with the heel of a moccasined foot. But he managed to hold the struggling animal with no worse result than a tiny cascading of snow from the bushes down his neck and up his sleeves, an inconvenience the beast would pay for as soon as they were out of this hide-away and he could swing the lash again.

The plane was already gone, swinging wide to avoid crashing the mountainsides. But it was back again, swinging, wheeling, turning, as if suspicious.

Then he heard faintly the roar of the engine, an odd whistle.

The dogs heard it too, and both of them leaped into action. Before he could clamp his arms tight enough around their necks, they had ducked and jerked from under, leaping wildly into the open, thrashing about in crazy eagerness, tangling the leash and making him great difficulty in hauling them back and quieting them again.

A single terrified glance upward had convinced him they were spotted, even if there had been any real doubt after that whistle. Panic seized him. With trembling hands he held the dogs and strapped on their diminished loads. Then he swung up his own pack, lifted his rifle, and started picking his way down the glen.

He had gone only a few steps when he lunged and fell, burying the precious rifle in the snow. Expecting solid rock, he had stepped into a hole filled level full by the drifting whiteness. Even as he fought to his feet again, he heard a faint sliding noise above him and looked up in horror.

His fall had dislodged a tiny cascade of snow that came pouring down the sharp slope at him, uncovering as it came rocks that seemed to hesitate about the wisdom of crashing down too.

Shaking with the narrowness of his temporary escape and with awareness that every foot of the way for half a mile ahead was equally threatening, he fished out his knife and cautiously cut the biggest branch he could find among the brush that had sheltered him. With this he probed every step of the way before he trusted his weight on the treacherous snow.

Foot by slow foot he went creeping and crawling down the slope. Once snow slid away from him in a rapidly spreading V that swept the ledge bare below him for a hundred yards and built up a pile directly below. Cracks across the exposed face of the ledge gave him foothold. He lowered the dogs and then eased himself down to the fall.

Knowing nothing of mountain-climbing in soft snow, he magnified the dangers and feared the worst. But the splash of falling water came to him at last, almost directly beneath him. His heart leaped at the sound.

He was so eager to reach the water that he almost started another slide, but they made it safely at last. The brook came brawling down another slash on the mountainside and meandered across the valley.

LeMoine's eyes gleamed with hope. He dragged the protesting dogs after him and deliberately splashed into the icy water.

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Then he waded downstream, reckless of the numbing cold that crept up with the rise of the water as he stepped into deeper and deeper holes.

When the whining dogs fought to crawl out onto the banks, he snubbed the leash shorter and refused to let them so much as touch a paw to earth or snow.

Turning, after he had negotiated a good hundred yards of the brook and rounded a bend to grin in delight at a full mile of stream cutting through a valley covered with little snow-laden trees, he peered back at the steep hillside he had just negotiated. Then he peered into the barrel of his rifle to make sure he had not stuffed it with snow during his fall or the descent. In another instant he had the weapon at his shoulder and was pointing it toward the rocks that he knew lay under that coverlet of snow above his recent hide-out.

Twice he fired without avail. But his third shot had the desired effect. A small wad of snow started to roll, picking up size and weight rapidly, leaping, plunging. Soon it was heavy enough to pick up smaller stones as well as damp snow, to hit hard, to start bigger and bigger rocks moving. Then a mighty avalanche roared down the remaining face, carrying tons of snow and tons on tons of the loose rocks cascading down to cover in a mighty pile of debris the spot where man and dogs had lain under the brush and the trail they had made on their way to the brook.

The fall dammed the brook temporarily too, causing the water to diminish rapidly around dogs and man. But LeMoine frowned at this and hurried onward, for the bottom was gravel and might hold their tracks until the plane returned.

He almost ran down the winding streambed, splashing in every pool he saw, walking on the slippery rocks to avoid the gravel, fighting the dogs constantly to keep them from leaping into the snow. The numbing cold was creeping up his legs, but he was sweating until his eyes smarted with the heat of exertion.

Then he found a long deadwater and waded recklessly into it, relieved that he could conceal their trail completely in its darkdepths.

Some tough remnant of a beaver colony, driven from farther south by over-trapping, had penetrated to this remote valley and built a dam across the brook to flood the acreage of tiny trees. Sign of their work as he pushed farther down the waters they had impounded both pleased and alarmed him. Beavers were easy to kill, and their flesh was palatable to a starving man and his dogs. Their furs would help in the coming battle with the cold. But the presence of beavers could be ascertained by one of those air-borne trappers scouring the country by plane for a winter trap-line. There might be a lone visitor as soon as this water froze to offer a plane a landing surface.

But his fears seemed groundless as he forged farther and sank to his very armpits in the icy water. The big shallow lake was still doted everywhere with the tops of stunted trees that thrust up just enough to prevent a safe landing from the air.

Holding the rifle high, he waded onward. The hope of having thrown his pursuers off his trail, even those who sought him from the air, offset the cruel bite of the cold. Either numbness and the glow of approaching stupor from cold or the assurance that he was safe at last spread a vast content through his chilled body.

The dogs swam and floundered along with him as he avoided the former bed of the brook and waded through the shallower water along the side of the pond toward the dam. He could see that work had not yet been finished on the structure. Raw ends of recently gnawed sticks proclaimed the recent origin of the lake, as did also the many little stumps where timber had been cut for the lacing that somehow impounded the expanse of water.

But this was no time to marvel at the cleverness of these animals so far from their customary habitat who had forced themselves to use whatever materials were at hand for their dam and their sustenance. He had seen evidence of wild things subsisting on matter foreign to their usual diet on too many occasions to wonder about finding beaver here or to puzzle over their being able to exist.

HE MUST fight that urge to lie down and sleep, or the numbness that reached almost to his heart would overcome him with eternal sleep.

He grinned with satisfaction as he saw

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that the work on the dam had not stopped with the coming of snow. The soft whiteness was tracked and matted on the irregular top of the barrier and far beyond. Damp bodies had left interlacing trails everywhere for many yards below the structure, as they went to gnaw down more trees and drag them to the dam to plug the places where water surged through.

Nobody would be able to tell from a plane that some of those tracks below were made by a man and his dogs. The scouts would see the avalanche and conclude that Pierre LeMoine had died with the dogs under those hundreds of tons of debris.

But he must fight this cold now. He must shed his wet garments and rub himself briskly with handfuls of the snow to make sure those white limbs would not freeze. Then he must wring the garments as dry as possible and curse his ill luck that he had no dry ones to don and dared light no fire to dry them. Hauling them on, wet and clammy, in that chill fall air was a cruel ordeal, after he had just slapped and rubbed warmth back into limbs and body, but he must dry them on his person or run the risk of having them freeze stiff if the cold increased as it threatened.

His teeth were chattering again as he started scurrying around in quest of brush. A few sticks would suffice to erect some kind of break against the weather. Draped with such wrappings as he could spare from his diminishing store of supplies, it would serve as some kind of shelter for himself and the dogs. But he must cover the khaki cloth with more brush to make the mound look like a beaver house from the air and toss some of the snow loosely over it to make it appear to have been built before the white coverlet fell.

Then he must find suitable sticks and stones for deadfalls and hunt the right places to set them to entrap the beavers that had declared a holiday and disappeared at his coming.

But he had perfect confidence that they would return and found just the right sticks for stretching their hides in an oval when he should go back to his traps to pick up and skin his victims.

He worked hard enough and fast enough to make his body glow under the cold wet clothing. In spite of the chill wind, he was steaming when he finally trotted back to where he had staked the dogs to a gnawed stump and forced them to crawl into the shelter to warm it for his return.

To make them lie still and not go barking out to frighten the hiding beavers, he opened the remaining meat and fed them more generously than he had before. Then, grateful that their body warmth had dried their own wet coats, he snuggled down between them and drew them almost on top of him to add their heat to his own to dry the rest of the dampness from his own garb.

HOURS later he awoke from cramped sleep to find himself thoroughly dried. But the damp snow wet his feet again through lacerated moccasins the minute he stepped out and started for his traps.

Two beaver had succumbed to his wiles, but they were gaunt and poorly furred for such a climate, not yet equipped with their winter coat and probably so poorly fed that they were stunted. But each skin would make a covering for a foot, a warm covering that could be worn with the fur inside to protect his toes from chilblains. The remains of his worn moccasins might be remade into some kind of protection for the thinner skin of the beaver and be worn outside to take the worst damage of travel.

The fresh meat was welcome. He skinned and ate the tails, giving the dogs the entrails only and the heads to gnaw. The flesh he buried in the snow for the morrow. Then he moved the deadfalls that had yielded the catch, lest the scent of the dead frightened the living away, and found material to build more.

He was trapping beaver before they were prime and meant to ignore the limit the law set for each trapper, for he knew only the law of survival now. He had flouted the conservation laws so often that he actually took delight in thinking that what he did was illegal. He would show the smart ones who made and tried to enforce such silly laws that he held them in disdain. Pierre LeMoine was a law unto himself. Let them come after him, if they wished. Not even the Mounties could capture Pierre. He defied the worst weather and made the most of the best. He knew how to take care of himself. His ancestry had met and won another wilderness far to the south. He would

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conquer this harsher one to the north and glory in the conquest and the eluding of those who sought to stop him.

His ancestors had fought and evaded Assiniboines and Cree and Winnebagos. They had even penetrated to the lands of Sioux and Fox and come home with great bales of beaver skins to prove their prowess. His crone of a grandmother had told him this long ago, and more than one factor had admitted that both his lines had been noted trappers, showing yellowed books that listed the quantities of fur they had traded.

All this had been during his youth when they urged him to flout the law to bring in beaver skins secretly after limits had been placed on the catch one man could take and he must attach a silly tag to each of the few skins they allowed him under their law. Then the great Hudson Bay Company had bought his illicit catch and all the skins he could collect from the Indians. They had been glad to teach him that some laws were to be mocked and ignored. They had paid him less than the going price for his beaver because they must smuggle the pelts past the prying nose of the Game Wardens, but they had taught him more than they reckoned. They had opened his eyes to the money to be made by ignoring and flouting the law.

HE CHUCKLED now as he remembered how he had turned their teaching against them. They had asked for more and more illicit furs. He had trapped and urged the Indians to trap on restricted lands. But the beaver had dwindled. He and his Indian relatives and friends had borrowed until they could not pay.

"This tam'," he had boasted at the post, "I will bring you more beaver as you never see before. Las' summer we fin' plenty dam. This winter we kill when fur get prime. Send plenty trade goods. We load your boats wit' pelt'."

There had been no new beaver dams, no freshly discovered colonies of busy animal workers. Only starving Indians and a crafty Pierre LeMoine who would collect the balance that he felt remained unpaid on the skins he had sold so cheaply as the supply dwindled.

He laughed again in retrospect as he lay between the two warm bodies of the dogs and waited for more beavers to spring the deadfalls he had just set.

The trader had come with boatloads of supplies, food, ammunition, fur-furrow for the bucks and their squaws, everything that had delighted the Indian trappers for years. Then Pierre had posted the bucks well and surrounded the astonished trader with rifles.

"Some law you t'ink ain' good," he jeered, "like dis one for stop takin' beaver. Dat's fine. Pierre t'ink so too. But Pierre don' lak' dis law what let white mans grow fat and reech while Injun starve an' grow poor. Pierre half white an t'ink, like you, dat law no good when she make man poor. For many year' you take fur and pay little. Now Pierre an' Injun take pay and give little fur. Before we no like. Now, you no like. Before white man is make law. Dis law Pierre and Injun make."

With this he had signed to the squaws to seize the goods and hurry away with them. With that incident he had turned his back on the Company. They had not reported the theft to local law enforcement officers, for fear of being implicated in the buying and smuggling of all those furs. It had been a species of hijacking preceding the American rum-running days.

But it had been a definite turning point in his career. He could see that as he looked back now. He had learned that a man need not work for a living if he ignored their laws and preyed on whoever had what he needed or wanted.

In his warped reasoning he overlooked the long trails he had been forced to negotiate at top speed, the cruel pursuits, the hair-breadth escapes. He even discounted his present precarious situation with few creature comforts to be anticipated in the long cold months ahead and with death or capture leering at him from every side. Cold, hunger, wet, fear—he dismissed them all in his roseate glow of body warmth and momentary freedom from hunger.

He would find more beaver in his traps. He would accumulate meat and fur enough to tide him through the fall until darkness and cold and frequent falls of more snow discouraged his pursuers or they declared him dead under the avalanche. Then he could fashion himself snowshoes of a sort and pad onward over the snow, encased in beaver fur, fed plentifully with beaver meat.

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XIX

FOXES found the spot where LeMoine had buried the bodies of his recently trapped beaver in the snow and devoured even the bones. When he crawled out and discovered their tracks, he swore softly, but allowed himself a crafty grin through the curses.

Fox fur was wonderfully thick and soft and warm against winter winds. With the chill increasing daily in the air, the thick undercoat would be starting to grow. He might well afford to sacrifice a little plentiful beaver meat for such furs as these thieves would contribute.

But those or other foxes had robbed his deadfalls too. He found only trampled and bloodied snow and such remnants of meat and bone as they had not been able to haul from under the weight of the stones.

Now he cursed fearfully and flew into a rage, but he quieted at last and set snares for the foxes, staying awake and waiting for a beaver to trip one of his traps in order to insure having the fur for himself and sacrificing only entrails and head for bait. When he had taken three beaver and set a dozen snares for the foxes, he sprung all the deadfalls and allowed himself all the sleep he wanted.

Three foxes had strangled in the snares. Although their fur was still far from prime, it would help in the making of the clothing he would soon need. He caught three more beaver and two more foxes before he stretched all the hides, hung them carefully on the outside of his crude hut, covered with enough brush so that they would remain unobserved from the air if the plane returned, and buried the carcasses close enough to their shelter so that the dogs would arouse him if more foxes came while he slept.

The roar of the plane brought him cautiously out on his stomach to peer without exposing his head. He had built his shelter over stumps that the beavers had left and had purposely tied the dogs so close to the butts that they could not frisk about, nor even reach the binding thongs with their teeth. Now they could not warn the men in the plane, even if that shrill whistle challenged them.

He lay and peered out from under the shelter and grinned as the plane finally seemed to get its bearings and start circling slowly over the scene of the avalanche.

He was grateful now that he had been crafty enough to wade the stream. It had risen enough to pour past the block caused by the fall, as he had ascertained by watching the level in the pond and the spill below the dam. Any footprints they had left in gravel or mud would have been washed away long ago by the water, or would be submerged now beyond notice from aloft. There was not the slightest trace to indicate that anything living had crawled away from the spot.

The plane went around and around like a huge bird cheated of its prey. At times it almost touched the rocks in its swoops. He thought the vibration of the motor or the chop of the propeller must start another slide, but nothing happened.

Then the plane swung away, headed northward, and started to climb as if to cross the mountains to the land party on the farther side to report the disaster. But it veered suddenly and swung away down the little valley he had followed to roar straight over where he lay looking up with quaking heart.

Banking, it came back, studying the dam and the water, where ice was creeping through the stunted trees and slowly closing even the most open spaces. LeMoine ducked back as the plane roared around and around his little shelter, alternately cursing them for their curiosity, certain they would detect his presence, and gloating with the momentary assuranue that he had covered everything too cleverly to leave a trace.

Then he wondered if he had. Could the snow he had sprinkled over the bloodspots of the killings have melted to betray him? Had his snares been too cleverly set and given him away by dangling foxes in their grip? Had his replica of a beaver house been placed correctly?

The last thought troubled him most. He had contemplated building his shelter on an exposed rock in the pond, but had abandoned the idea because that would entail wetting himself every time he went in or out until the water froze sufficiently to bear him. Usually beaver built inside the pond they created, but occasionally they erected a shelter at the edge, where they could tun-

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nel to the deeper part of the artificial lake for the supply of edible bark they cached there for the coldest weather and kept in liquid cold storage. To avoid the repeated sloshing through icy water, he had built on the shore. Now he feared that he had risked discovery in his trying to save himself exposure.

But, he considered, he would have broken the thin anchor ice along the shore and around the rock in his comings and goings. They could have observed the channel through the ice very easily from the air, for beaver never broke the ice in such a fashion, but dived under it.

Self-castigation could avail him nothing. He must decide if he was safe to stay here or must push on again.

He found two beaver and a single fox after setting his deadfalls and snares and waiting. There were no signs of additional tracks anywhere around the little pond as far as he could see. Not another beaver had ventured forth to fell a tree or collect branches to store in the deep pools, or to scurry in quest of mud for plastering holes where the water still escaped. Either he had cleaned out the little colony, or he, the foxes, and the plane had scared the rest of them into retirement.

The plane came back while he was still brooding, driving him into his shelter like a terrified rabbit while it again swung over the debris in the gorge upstream and once more swooped low over the pond.

He halfway expected a bomb to drop on the hut or a body to come hurtling down with a parachute blooming out into a great mushroom of wind-billowed silk with a tiny form swaying and lurching beneath, for he knew the possibilities. But the plane finally swung away to the southwest and left him alone with his dogs and his thoughts.

He was not long in deciding. The warmth and comport were hard to leave, but that lingering plane had driven his elation away. His spirits had dropped faster than the thermometer readings during the first few days he had spent in the Hendersons.

The packs that he bound on the dogs were as heavy as they could carry. His own was both bulky and weighty. The skins were not dried and the meat was frozen and solid, but he could not risk a fire to smoke and dry it, and the sun was gone.

The water seemed even colder than before, and he broke little frills of anchor ice along the quieter edges of the pools as he stumbled on, but he drove himself to follow the stream instead of plowing through the snow. He felt certain that plane would return and would note the tracks he and the dogs would leave.

Sloshing and splashing in his haste, he wet himself almost to the shoulders, although the stream was shallower here below the dam. Holding the dogs from the banks, he went floundering on at the fastest pace he could manage with the uncertain bottom. He knew that he must expend enough energy to make enough heat to offset the cold numbing effect of the water, or perish.

TRIPPING, he splashed face downward, wetting himself completely, but he scrambled up before the water could penetrate his pack. He was better off now than when he waded to the beaver pond, for now he had dry fox and beaver pelts inside that burden. When he stripped off wet clothing at the end of his mad dash, he could rub himself glowing warm and crawl between warm furry pelts to sleep before donning wet clothes on the morrow for another dash down the stream.

He tripped again and found he was too weak to spring up with alacrity. Weariness and the numbing cold were sapping his endurance. He must rest and warm himself, take the flight in easy stages.

He began looking for something that would serve as a shelter. His feet were so numb they no longer felt the bruising blows of submerged rocks as he stumbled and bumped against them. They failed to send his numbing brain the correct picture of the bottom they encountered. He stumbled oftener and saved himself from falling repeatedly only by grabbing at the head or back of the dogs he kept closely bound to him.

The animals gave him no encouragement. They resented the heavy loads and the constant immersions. They fought him at times in an effort to escape to the bank. They shook themselves and drenched his drying upper garments with spray whenever they lifted far enough from the water to warrant the effort.

He hated them and blessed them alter-

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nately. When a sturdy pair of shoulders offered a quick clutch at long hair to save him from falling, he counted himself fortunate in having Husky at his side, but when a similar grab at less furred head and back let him slither and sposh into a pool, he came up spluttering his anger and kicked Spareribs viciously with a heel for having let him down.

A brushy thicket overhung a turn of the brook. They could plunge into it and be hidden from the air. There would be no tracks to reveal that they were hiding. He could tied the dogs to the trunk of the biggest bushes, snub them so short they could not struggle if that whistle came again.

His numbness this time went clear up to his brain. He could not think clearly, could not remember everything. Loosen the muzzles and feed the dogs. Strip himself and rub furiously with snow until warm. Wring out the wet clothing and spread it over the sleeping dogs to dry partially in the warmth that rose from their fur, making it a little easier to crawl into the clammy garments when he awoke and must force himself into the stream again for another dash. Warm his fingers again until he could loosen the loads from the back of the dogs. Let them get a good rest for the ordeal ahead.

He did all this and lay under the furs he had stitched loosely together for a sleeping bag. The warmth of the sleeping dogs was welcome outside the fur. It soothed and lulled him, taking the ache out of tired muscles, bringing a pleasant glow in place of the cruel numbing of the water that he had endured for hours.

Dropping off to sleep he wondered vaguely if he had re-tightened the muzzles after feeding the dogs. He thought he had. Couldn't remember. But reaching to find out would mean exposing his arms and shoulders to the cruel cold that crept under the brush and waited to numb any exposed flesh. The dogs were sleeping peacefully. Too tired to try to fight free or to give him further trouble. He had cowed them. They knew him for their master.

He woke and felt their warmth and nearness as they crowded against him and was reassured. Then he dreamed that he heard their jaws champing and slavering, but told himself even in his dreams that he was dreaming because of his womanish fears and rolled to ease his discomfort and slept again.

But he had not dreamed. Huskie had fallen asleep aware that his jaws were free. But he had tried too many times to gnaw that strap to believe he could chew it while his temporary master was awake and watching. He slept, but with the internal alarm clock of hope set to warn him awake in an effort at freedom. The big jaws were trying to cut the leash free, even as LeMoine thought he dreamed he heard the slavering efforts.

Slowly he turned the big head until that restraining strap pulled taut. He had been tied so tight that he almost rubbed off the end of his nose, but he managed at last to force it past the stub that held him, sawing that tough rawhide into his mouth. Then he tried to bring the slippery thong across teeth that would grind and sever it.

Spareribs aroused at the slight movement, sensed that his own jaws were free, and started a similar procedure. But he had been tied so close that he could not get his face away from the bole of the bush. He merely fought the knot silently and slipped it vainly up and down the butt, but failed to get it between his teeth.

Huskie was free. The taut line parted with a snap that almost tumbled him onto the snoring LeMoine, but he managed to save himself. Then he began to crawl out, cautiously, carefully, fearful of waking the man who had beaten him so frequently and so cruelly in the past.

Picking his way carefully, he slid toward the struggling Spareribs. His questing nose found the thong. His teeth closed on it and ground.

LeMoine moved restlessly, aware of a chill where the warmth of the bigger dog had been. He stirred, groped, sat up suddenly.

Huskie snarled and whirled from chewing the thong to stand over him and force him back into his fur sleeping bag with a terrified scream. There was neither rifle nor lash within easy reach. He had no club to seize and swing. Even his knife was beyond his reach, if he had dared extend a groping hand for it.

He could rely on no weapon now but the equipment nature had given him, and he dared not face that big dog without a

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weapon. He could remember too vividly the resentment he had seen lurking in those eyes as he forced the magnificent animal to do his bidding.

Now he cowered and cursed himself for leaving the muzzles loose and wondered when those sharp fangs would rip the fur bag aside and reveal him in his nakedness, a perfect target for vengeful teeth to tear.

For long minutes Huskie stood, spraddled over the covering form, the scent of the coward's fear penetrating to his delicate nostrils, his whole body quivering with eagerness to slash if the victim so much as dared to raise his head.

Then a pathetic whine from the struggling Spareribs brought him back to the job of releasing his comrade. This time his eyes watched that huddle under the furs while his big teeth sought and found the thong and chewed and ground at it. He was ready to spring at the first sight of projecting hand or face, but LeMoine could sense the threat of danger and dared not stir.

Spareribs jerked and tugged. The teeth bit hard. The thong parted.

With a leap the smaller dog was away. But he was back with another bound and burrowing with his nose.

The terrified LeMoine felt that this was the end. They would tear him to bits before he could seize a weapon and drive them off. At any instant those fangs would rip the meager stitching away and expose his bare flesh to their mercy.

Then Spareribs found what he sought and jerked it forth. His teeth had closed on the hated pack he had borne all day, a replica of the crushing weights he had carried for so many days for this merciless master. But it was not sheer vindictiveness that made him rip the pack open and attack its frozen contents. The pack consisted of meat the man had stripped from beaver and fox carcasses, before he threw them the bones. The fox meat he had meant for them, the beaver for himself, but the half-starved dogs knew nor cared about this. They gulped and nosed until the contents of one pack were gone, then nudged until they found the second.

Halfway through the contents of that, they were satiated and stopped. LeMoine, aware what they were doing, was too terrified to make any effort to stop them. He could only be grateful that the biggest and heaviest pack, the one he had carried himself, was under his head and he had wriggled and squirmed enough to get his body around it in a protecting curve.

If they tried to get at that, he was ready to do his best to leap up and fight them. The major supply of his food was in that. He would risk his life for that, since it meant life or death to him in the next few days.

But they halted their feasting before they finished the second burden. Licking their chops, they sniffed again at the terrified huddle in the sleeping bag, uncertain what to do in their leaderless condition.

The odor from the sack was far from reassuring. It bespoke the fear of the trembling wretch within. Huskie whirled and slipped out of the bushes into the gray twilight, lifting his head to scent the chill wind. But Spareribs could not resist the temptation to nip at a squirming limb under the crackling outer surface of the hides.

A YELP of abject terror rewarded him. His teeth closed on the corner of a poorly sewed skin and tugged playfully, mischievously. The stitches tore free, exposing the naked man beneath.

LeMoine came up with a wild leap of desperation, striking the bushes that arched over him and cascading soft snow over him. Wildly he groped for his rifle, certain that this was the end, that a battle to the finish had begun under those bent bushes.

As if he understood the meaning of that blind groping in the deep shadows under the laden growth, Spareribs seized the rifle by the small of the stock and leaped playfully away, dragging the heavy weapon after him, sneezing and coughing as if laughing at the joke he was playing on his former tormenter.

LeMoine saw what the dog had done and all his courage ebbed from him. He knew now that this was indeed a wizard in the body of a wolf. Who had ever heard of a dog so diabolically clever? At any instant now the fiend would change into human form again and shoot him in payment for all the abuse he had heaped on the animal in the past months.

He sank to his knees in the snow and lifted his hands in prayer.

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"You can' shoot a man when he's pray," he begged. "Mary, Holy Mother—"

Huskie threw up his head impatiently, as if he had seen enough of the degradation of the heartless wretch. The noise that came from him was neither a bark nor a howl. It was more a low-voiced command to his comrade to stop his silly foolishness and come on.

Spareribs dropped the rifle after dragging it through enough snow to insure cramming the barrel with snow and making it dangerous to fire without a cleaning. His head came up. His lips spread into a mischievous, mocking grin as he stared at the pleading man, bare in the snow. Then he turned disdainfully and trotted away after the bigger Huskie into the dim weird light.

XX

LEMOINE dared not crawl back into his ripped sleeping bag in an effort to rest and sleep further. It was too gaping to offer much shelter, and he would freeze without the warm bodies of the dogs.

His terror was too great for him to notice the cold of the damp clothes as he drew them on. His teeth were already chattering with fright from his narrow escape, and he was still convinced that the playful dog was really a fiend taunting him, torturing him, determined to kill him only when he was sufficiently punished.

He did not take time to clear the barrel of his rifle, but hurriedly gathered his torn bag into the pack, swung the burden to his back, seized the snowy weapon, and fled.

The stream would be of no avail to him now, for he knew those canine fiends would be delighted to point him out to the plane on its return. His only hope of safety lay in fleeing faster than the men afoot could come to overtake him. He must make a trading post or some village where he could steal a sledge and dogs and equipment with which to face the cold. Then he could pick off his canine pursuers with bullets he would make of silver coins and disappear far to the eastward in the great Barren Lands beyond Slave Lake.

But pushing through the soft snow was no easier than wading the brook. In spite of the chill air, his body heat melted the snow that he accumulated on feet and legs and kept his lower limbs wet and the clothing sopped. His exertions made him perspire so heavily above the chill of the melted snow that his upper garments were wet close to his body, making him shiver in the chill wind every time he halted to gasp for breath.

His only satisfaction was in the distance he was putting behind him. He was leaving a trail that could easily be spotted from the air, but he was gaining on any outfit that might be directed to catch him.

A little of his old elation returned, in spite of his losses. He was still alive and fed and able to drive through the snow. When he stopped to rest now he could risk a fire to warm and dry him. He could make himself crude snowshoes for swifter travel.

The thought halted him. He was a fool to rush off thus, plowing through soft snow he could easily skim on webs. Far better to halt and make them, even at the sacrifice of some of the furry hides.

Throwing off his back, he found dry sticks and started a fire. The warmth cheered him. His fingers could still weave strips of hide into a pattern that would carry him over the soft drifts. He was well rid of those fiends of dogs. They had brought all his ill luck on him.

The sudden appearance of Sparerib's grinning face seemed to mock him. The dogs had started off on their own, felt uncertain without leadership, awed by the vast empty wastes around them. Always having been dependent upon man for food, they realized that foraging for themselves in such a barren land would be next to impossible. Although they hated LeMoine bitterly, they were dependent upon him for food and guidance.

The long trip had robbed them both of any sense of direction. They would have gladly set out to return to their real masters, reckless of untold miles without food, but they had come so far and traversed such impossible trails that they knew they could not backtrack. Bewildered, worried, they had decided to follow the man they hated, hoping that he would lead them to something better than this frozen wilderness.

Accordingly they trotted along the trail he had left, pricking up their ears at the twitter of a hardy bird standing upside down on a twig to peck for seeds, scooting

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off hopelessly after a snowshoe rabbit, but always slinking back to the trail and trotting steadily after the one man in all that waste.

Huskie was content to bed down in the brush at some distance from the camp, but Spareribs half circled and crept closer. Tongue lolling, lips curled back in what looked to be a disdainful and taunting grin, he peered at the halfbreed just as the man was congratulating himself on having lost the dogs.

The effect was instantaneous. LeMoine shrieked and leaped for his rifle. The dog tumbled over backward in his alarm at the unexpected yell and scrambled to be off in a spurt for shelter.

Forgetting that he had not cleaned the weapon since it was jerked and dragged about in the snow by the dog hours earlier, LeMoine lifted the rifle and fired.

The breech burst open with a blinding flare, hurling ripped metal past his face, sending him reeling more with terror than injury, while the dog scampered away in safety to rejoin his comrade.

LeMoine knew now that he was haunted by something more than ordinary bad luck. He was pursued by fiends.

He shook with rage and frustration until his fingers could not weave the strands. The sight of the ruined rifle, the second these maddening dogs had ruined for him, made him so wild that he seized it and hurled it as far as he could. But even then his fingers were trembling and his teeth chattering, although he fed the fire more and more sticks until he dared not venture further beyond its glow in quest of more.

Then he realized that he was weaponless. The rifle would serve as a club with which to fight back the dogs if they attacked. He must find it or he dared not go on through the dusk.

Making a torch from brush, he went in widening circles until he found the ruined rifle. Then he crept back to his fire with another armful of sticks and forced himself to continue work on the shoes.

BEFORE the webbing was completed, snow began to fall again, bringing even deeper dusk. But the frightened man could not sleep. Whenever he closed his eyes he could imagine those slinking, leering forms stalking him, creeping closer and closer, ready to spring on him and sink their fangs into his flesh.

The thought tumbled him out of his repaired sleeping bag and set him to replenishing the fire and renewing his fumbling efforts at the lacing of the snowshoes. He might lose the fiends in the storm. If he could slip away while they slept—

He forced his fingers to stop shaking and laced rapidly. The webbing grew. Still shaking with a combination of fear and grim determination he lashed the webs to his feet.

The wind was his compass. He knew that it came from the northeast. By quartering into it he could hold his head down to avoid the worst of the lashing pelt and drive off the flakes yet still peer along the surface for the little trees and the clumps of brush that might trip him if he stumbled on them unaware.

Grimly he struggled onward interminably. His strength was waning. The magnificent reserve on which he had always relied was beginning to fail.

He panted to a halt and felt the chill strike through his perspiration even while he still gasped for breath. But he had made some miles through the snow. The falling flakes were fast obliterating his trail. Perhaps he had shaken off those fiendish dogs.

He collected more sticks and built a quick fire to warm himself and his clothing for the morrow. The flame threw a red glare over the surrounding snow, but he knew the falling flakes would make it visible but a scant mile or two.

Food heartened him. Here he could sleep in safety, far from those fangs that sought his lifeblood.

He felt of the steaming garments, decided they would be dry in a few more minutes, threw back his head and started to open his mouth in song.

Two pairs of gleaming coals in the darkness froze the words in his throat, paralyzed his vocal cords, sent a chill galloping up and down his spine.

But they might be wolves, emboldened by hunger, foxes sneaking about to snatch what they could while he slept. Recklessly he threw on more wood. The flames leaped.

He stared in horror, a worse horror than

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wolves would have brought. That ridiculously ragged, leering Spareribs was standing grinning at him tauntingly, with the bigger Huskie glowering solemnly over the smaller dog's back, as if ready to carry out whatever deviltry the smaller comrade initiated.

If his nerves had been steadier, he would have known that the dogs trailed him because they sensed that he could feed them, but he was too terrified to reason. He had a fixation now that the dogs were dogging him to torment him, to torture him to a slow death in this forsaken land, to hound him into a darkness deeper than the gathering night that would soon embrace the land.

He was too leg weary to go on, too frightened to sleep, too certain the dogs were fiends to plan their recapture. He forgot in his horror how he had trapped them before with food and snares, forgot how he had mastered them for untold miles, clubbed them unconscious. When any fragments of those experiences returned to his fevered brain, they only served to make him shudder anew with the conviction that these creatures had treasured every indignity and were holding them all against him now.

Sleep overcame him at last. He dozed fitfully. The flames burned into a mere winking red eye among the ashes, hissing faintly with each fleck of falling snow.

Then the dogs crept closer, driven by returning gnawings of hunger, and sniffed questingly.

LeMoine awoke in terror and drove them back, swinging the rifle in a wide arc, screaming horribly in his fear.

Then he strapped on his crude webs again and mushed through the snow, forcing himself onward hour after weary hour. But when he halted to look back, those two forms were trotting steadily after him, their bodies a darker gray against the white snow and the gray dusk.

When he camped, he carefully put his swebs under him and pillowed his head on his duffle, determined that they should sneak neither from under his nose while he slept. But they were always there, prowling close and terrifying him, startling him awake, driving him to fresh efforts. He would have sworn they never left his trail nor went fifty yards beyond his campfire. He knew that they lived without food, subsisting only because they were supernatural beings.

But the dogs had remembered a previous experience in the Arctic. The scent of a startled snowshoe rabbit brought it all back. These bunnies ran in wide circles when alarmed, like their smaller cousins far to the south. If both dogs went tearing silently off in pursuit, the hare could easily outrun them, buoyed as he was by the weblike formation around his feet that gave him his name and driven by those tireless hind legs. But craft could defeat speed. While

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Spareribs tore after one frightened specimen, Huskie huddled down in the snow, partly concealed by the very bush from which the bunny had scooted, and waited patiently.

His keen ears traced the wide arc that loping rabbit and pursuing dog were making. His big body tensed for the spring.

On came the disdainful hare, its head over its shoulder to mock the tiring Spareribs as he floundered in soft snow that the hare could negotiate with so much greater ease. If the specie could laugh and jeer, he would be exceeding the most scornful street urchin as he loped.

Then Huskie leaped. His dark form flashed out from the brush unexpectedly. His great fangs lashed down.

The great hare whirled in midair to be off in another direction, but even that magnificent maneuver failed. Fangs sank into the tender neck and crunched hard.

The hungry dogs devoured even the head and bones and fur, then trotted back to LeMoine's trail and were following at their regular distance when he peered back again, so quickly had it all happened.

After that they no longer needed the man for food. When he gained some mastery over his shattered nerves and baited them with bits of meat in his waiting circle of thong, they lay and laughed at him, their bellies no longer rumbling emptily.

But they clung to his trail instinctively because of their age-old association with man. Any other human being would have drawn them off, but there was no other. He was the one link with the security they had known all their lives. Cruel as he had been to them, he represented stability somehow in this strange wild waste, even though they no longer depended on him for food.

So they went on for days and days. LeMoine's food was dwindling and must be augmented. He set snares for rabbits. He caught one the first night, but the dogs found it before he did and left only a bloody stain, some fur, and their telltale tracks to tell him who had robbed him.

He was forced to stay awake and wait for the snares to spring, driving the dogs away with shouts and the waving rifle to get the needed meat.

Weakness from lack of food and sleep slowed his pace. They barely crept. The snow covered any trail that might have led him to a settlement, even if he had dared approach one with those tell-tale dogs to identify him to anybody who had listened to his escape when the broadcasts came over the radio.

HE HAD only one consolation, and that maddened him more than it reassured him. The plane had not come back since that last sweep it had made over the beaver pond. The trail he was forced to leave as he plodded over the steadily accumulating snow was not being observed from above and leading the land party in pursuit. The scouting plane must have reported that he and the dogs had been covered by the avalanche he had created to hide his trail.

But the thought only embittered him the more. His flight down the icy brook and his subsequent loss of the dogs and his damaging of the rifle had all been in vain. He could have remained undetected at the pond, trapping and remaining beaver and fox, accumulating meat and furs in plenty until he was ready to leave in comfort.

Spareribs tormented him more than the more aloof Huskie. The smaller dog was like a mischievous boy. He always came close to the camp and startled the weary man awake with a sudden alarming woof, or a vicious tug at the sleeping bag, or a purposeful nosing of the man as if determined to give him no rest or to have the last of his dwindling provisions from the sack under him.

Always he came up screaming with abject terror, remembering how those fangs had bared him and threatened him that first night of their rebellion. Always he spent waning energy chasing the scampering dog, only to lose him and come shivering back to dive into the repaired and stronger sleeping bag again in an effort to get a little rest before driving on again.

Then Spareribs would sit and grin at him through the dusk or emit little taunting yelps of triumph until the more sedate Huskie would nudge him into silence and all three would snatch a few minutes of sleep before Spareribs would conceive some new deviltry to torment the weary man.

Ice covered the river that they saw stretching before them, but the ice was new and thin. Some of it was deeply covered with

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snow along the edges of the deadwaters and would bear a man's weight, but out in the center of even these it was slick and thin where it had evidently just formed since the latest snow. At the rapids, the splash had frozen and covered the rocks and hung in great icy pendants from sticks and moss and fern, but the open water was only slowly feeling the cramping effect of ice that edged nearer and nearer and would eventually congeal even the tumbling and lashing to crystal.

He was too new to the country to know that he had reached the Porcupine River, but he did know that the course he sought led eastward and this stream seemed to flow west. Accordingly he clung to the bank as best he could and trudged along upstream.

At times he was forced to make great detours because of the steep cliffs that dipped into rapid water. At times he went gingerly out on the ice, feeling his way by chunking the butt of his rifle at every step and watching for resulting cracks. He grew expert at telling from their shape and extent just how secure he was in inching forward.

But the cold was increasing every day, thickening the ice, spreading it out even into the slower moving currents. He could shove along with impunity now in the long areas of deadwater.

The dogs were forced to leave the river and plunge into the brush along the banks now to get their rabbits, but he barely noticed their desertion of his trail. He was obsessed now with a fresh fear that offset even his terror of the dogs. His food was dangerously low. He must find rich food in quantity soon or starve.

The beaverskins that he had used for moccasins had worn out repeatedly before he made his webs, endangering his supply of fur for warmth. Now he must have not only food but additional clothing, a warmer sleeping bag, a rifle, ammunition. The list seemed endless. His only hope, he knew, was to find some lone trapper or prospector, somebody who had come in too loaded with sheer necessities to burden himself with a radio which might have apprised him of the escape and the man hunt.

He could no longer lie in hiding in the brush and pick the unsuspecting victim off from a distance, for his rifle was useless. But he could plead his dire condition to gain the man's confidence and kill him by a quick blow to the head or a stab in the back when once within his camp or cabin.

Spareribs still tormented him with his prowlings, but LeMoine had regained hope with his dreams of finding somebody along this river. An axe had chopped trees here and there. He had no doubt that fires had been built. People had passed this way, either in boats or afoot, and had camped along the stream.

If he had not been so desperate for food he would have kept back from the river more, sneaking along the banks, willingly accepting the harder going for the protection it would afford. But he was getting too weak to tear through clinging brush, scale steep hills, fight the deep drifts. The ice was level and swept clear much of the way of banking drifts. He could venture onto the smoother, cleared ice now and push on easier, make more miles, find that unsuspecting victim quicker.

All but the worst of the rapids were frozen now. The ice was hubbly and sometimes he slid back down the gentle grade and was forced to creep on hands and knees to get upstream, but he kept driving onward.

The dogs had more time to disappear on the hunt now, for his progress was slow, even on the ice. They disliked the smoothest places, where their paws skidded and their legs splayed out from under them, but otherwise keeping close to the man was growing easier as his pace slowed.

But an uneasiness bothered Huskie. He sensed the waning strength of the man, perhaps scented his utter weakness in the odor that he sniffed. He grew to resent the teasing tactics of his mischievous smaller comrade and would growl at him as if telling him to leave the man alone.

Spareribs only grinned and cocked his ragged ears and seemed to be thinking up new ways to worry the wreck of humanity that grew daily weaker and weaker as the cold grew steadily stronger and the snow deeper.

(*To be concluded in the next* SHORT STORIES)

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Could What a Man Did on Earth Really Make Any Difference to the Sun, Wind and Clouds?

THE SKY STONE

By RUI CHESTOR

THE gap where Welling, riding Nolan's black stallion on which the branded "N" had been skilfully doctored to look like a "W", lighted upon the churinga cave was in the heart of the Parakeelia country. It was a narrow rugged twisting slash through an unnamed range rising abruptly from the sand and it was dark and clammy and so deep in the middle you could see only a ribbon of sky far above you.

They rode into the gap in the early morning, and little wizened Brad McCurdie, the prospector, took pick and hammer and began gouging overburden and tapping off pieces of rock. Welling, not interested in anything like work, went off on the prowl and so came upon the cave in an elbow of the southern wall. His yell brought Brad on the run, thinking something had happened.

When Brad saw the cave and the flat pieces of shale inscribed with aboriginal markings and the heap of ceremonial stone knives and the sacred bull-roarers, he told Welling to come away and leave the place

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alone. Brad wanted no trouble with his friends, the Parakeelia men, who were so called because in their territory the parakeelia grass abounded, the squat plant that held water in its mushy stem and thick leaves so that animals, and men too, need never thirst where it grew even though the country was bone dry with drought. If Brad had been alone, the Parakeelia men would have showed themselves, for, in their queer way, they liked him.

"Hell, what's bitin' you?" growled Welling. "I want to look 'round. Might be somethin' worth havin'." He was big, swarthy and arrogant and fond of flaunting his strength, and there was threat in the way he caressed his rifle. He didn't bother to conceal his contempt for Brad, who was scarcely more than half his weight.

So he pried into the cave and found the sky stone in a small recess dug out at the back of a crevice. "What did I tell y'?" he said to Brad.

The sky stone was black meteorolite, a stone occasionally found in the Australian deserts. Because it came from the sky, the blacks called it the sky stone. Originally, this one might have been as big as a tennis-ball, but some old aboriginal craftsman had patiently ground it down till it had the shape of a thick convex lens. He had polished it with fine desert dust and then engraved mystic signs on it and embellished the edge with a fretwork of tiny holes bored clean through. Brad never saw a sky stone prepared for the blackfellow's ritual without thinking of the months, perhaps years, of slow tenacious endeavor it represented.

"The rain maker's churinga," he said. "The rain maker uses it to control the weather. Put it back, Jim, and let's go."

Welling slipped the sky stone into the pocket of his jodhpurs. His big voice boomed in the cave. "It goes with me. The city museums pay real money for specimens like this."

"Don't reckon you ought to do that," protested Brad, to whom taking the sky stone was a kind of desecration, for he respected the blackfellow's superstitions and never interfered with his possessions. Certainly the Parakeelia men would regard it as desecration. "You're asking for trouble, Jim."

"What trouble?" snarled Welling.

"I'd hate to see you stop a Parakeelia killing stick," said Brad mildly, for the worst he then knew against Welling was his riding a horse with an altered brand. Brad impugned no man till he was sure of the facts.

THE bad weather started an hour after they had ridden out of the gap. A low mass of cloud moved in gently from the north-west and shut down on them in a cold wet fog. Welling began to curse. He did not carry a cape—he had very little gear—and he seemed to regard a fog in the middle of the dry season as a personal affront. Brad said little, but he thought of the sky stone and wondered. He could picture a naked black figure on the hilltop gesticulating and dancing and, with wild incantations, invoking the gods' vengeance upon the profanation of their sanctuary.

Before long, the fog had thickened till they could see no more than twenty yards away. All day they rode, muffled in its grey shroud. It soaked through their clothing and blanketed sound and smothered Welling's hoarse voice till the effort of talking tired him and he lapsed into sullen silence.

At nightfall, they tethered the horses to desert oaks in a small gully and made camp under an overhanging shelf of rock nearby. When Brad had draped his tarpaulin over the side and lighted a fire, the place was reasonably comfortable. After they had eaten, Welling took out the sky stone and polished it till its black surface danced in the fire light. But its beauty gave him no pleasure and he cursed the fog till Brad was constrained to expostulate.

"Waste of time swearing at the weather, Jim," he said. "Might be good luck or bad. I wouldn't know. But there was no call to take the sky stone. You shouldn't have taken it, Jim. The blacks set great store by that sort of thing."

Welling's huge hand tightened on the stone. "I took it because I wanted it. Damn the niggers. An' damn the fog. An' if you reckon we're gettin' the fog because I took a rain maker's stone, then damn you for a fool."

"I don't reckon that at all," returned Brad evenly. "I can't see what a man does down here on the ground making any difference

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to the sun and wind and clouds, though the rain makers have done queer things. But you should've left the sky stone in the cave. After all, it belongs to the Parakeelia men."

Welling was savagely domineering. "It belongs to me an' that's the end of it."

Brad shook his head. "'Tisn't the end of it. I know the Parakeelia men. They're shy, but they're tough. What you ought to do is turn right round and take the sky stone back to the cave."

"Like hell I will," said Welling. He rubbed the sky stone on his knee, held it once more to the fire light and then pushed it back into his pocket. "It's money. An' it goes out with me."

A STOLEN sky stone and a stolen horse, thought Brad. Two things had perplexed him since Welling had joined him three days before. One was whether Welling had stolen Tom Nolan's big black stallion or not. Welling's story was he had bought the animal in Hall's Creek which was three hundred miles north-east of Nolan's Nooramine cattle run. Brad had no means of judging the truth of this, for Welling was the first white man he'd seen for six weeks or more. And Brad had *not* asked for an explanation of the faked brand which he had spotted as soon as he recognized the stallion.

The other hurdle balking Brad's thoughts was Welling's lack of equipment. Brad, trekking south as far only as Lady Editha Lagoon, where there was a telluride formation he had long wanted to explore, had two horses, and the pack horse carried a pile of gear. Even then he considered he was travelling economically. But Welling, who claimed he was going out, had only his .303 and a knapsack mainly filled, Brad judged, with shells. He said he wasn't worried about supplies. It was a good season for game and he would live on the country.

It didn't add up, Brad reasoned. If you're going out, you catch the steamer or plane at either Wyndham or Derby. You don't contemplate crossing the worst stretch in Australia with one horse and no supplies worth talking about. And, if you do, you don't start off by antagonizing the blacks, unless you're a fool.

Staring across the fire at Welling's dark sullen face, he said, "You'll be sorry about the sky stone, Jim. I'm telling you." Then, because he wanted to get a line on the stallion, he added, "Don't forget the nearest white man is Tom Nolan at Nooramine, and he's two hundred miles away."

Welling looked up from the fire with a queer flash of eyes. "Well, it's no use countin' on Nolan. He's dead."

A sense of fateful expectancy possessed Brad. "Nolan *dead*!"

"Yair," said Welling a shade too carelessly. "Word came into the Creek just before I left he'd shot himself or somethin'."

"Good God!" cried Brad, but not for Nolan's death, but because he'd got the fact he was looking for. Happy, hearty Tom Nolan was not the kind of man who shot himself. Perhaps it was the gleam of Welling's eyes, or the tone of his voice, or the kind of secret jauntiness with which he spoke of Nolan's death, or simply Brad's instinct, but he knew as though he'd seen it that Welling had shot Tom Nolan and that he wasn't going out but on the run, that he hadn't come south from the Creek but east from Nooramine.

And the brand had been altered for his benefit. Welling had known he was out in the Parakeelia country and Welling wanted supplies. A man *must* have supplies to venture into the desert. Welling would dispose of him as soon as they were clear of the Parakeelia men who would resent anything happening to Brad McCurdie.

FOR a moment Welling and the fire swam mistily in front of Brad and he felt cold inside. He knew then why Welling so conspicuously played with the rifle. He clung to the thought of the sky stone as his one chance, for he didn't know the fog was to stay four days with them, and he said steadily enough, "It's bad about Nolan. But, Jim, you made a mistake taking the sky stone. The Parakeelia men are right after it now."

Welling kicked the fire into fresh life. His shadow billowed on the wall behind him, huge and menacing. "Like hell they are," he sneered. "Not in this weather."

Brad made his voice calm and flat so that every word would sink with finality into Welling's mind. "I know the Parakeelia men, Jim. They were in the gap though we didn't see them. When we moved out, they

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moved with us. They travelled with us in the fog. And now they're sitting out there watching and waiting. They want the sky stone back, Jim."

Welling spat into the fire. "They'll want, too. You've got a damfool imagination, McCurdie. Been too much on your own." But he was fingering his rifle for all that.

Brad thought, perhaps I *have* got a damfool imagination. He decided to test the matter. He said casually, "Well, I've warned you, Jim . . . I'll stroll outside and have a look at the horses. And then it'll be time to turn in."

Welling was on his feet as quickly as Brad. When they went out into the fog, he was so close that his elbow brushed against Brad's shoulder, and he kept it there till they returned to the camp. And he carried the rifle. Brad knew then beyond question that Welling was a guilty man and intended him never to get away.

Next morning, the fog was heavier and pressed so closely into the shelter they could scarcely tell that day had come. The piece of mulga wood lay on the ground unnoticed till Brad trod on it. He picked it up and studied it for a few seconds; then he held it out to Welling. "So you reckon the Parakeelia men aren't on the job," he said. "Look at this."

The slab was about six inches long and four inches wide. At first glance, it seemed that someone had been doodling on the flat surface with a sharp stone. Then, out of the hieroglyphics, five figures emerged. The first was like a bent bow and an arrow without the bow string. Next was the stick figure of a man running and beside that another stick figure, one hand of which terminated in three little rings hanging vertically. An oval with tiny dots around its edge followed and the last was a rough semi-circle fringed with little lines. Welling pushed the tarpaulin aside and stepped out into better light. He stared at the scratches. "What is it?"

"A Parakeelia message stick," replied Brad. It's for me. That sign on the end that looks like a pick is the Parakeelia sign for me. I use a pick."

"And the rest of it?"

Brad squinted at the squiggles. "Jim, you're not going to like this. The Parakeelia rain maker sent this message. He's telling me to run away and leave you. They want you on your own for you're the man who took the sky stone. And they want the sky stone back in the cave. There's the message, Jim."

Welling spat a foul term of contempt. "To hell with them."

"No good talking like that," said Brad. "That stick was dropped under the tarp without us knowing. They could just as easy shoved a spear into us. They're right on to us, Jim."

"Right on to us or wrong, I've got the sky stone an' I'm keepin' it," said Welling angrily. "I'll show 'em what I think about their message." And he threw the message stick out into the fog.

"That wont please them," said Brad.

"Who in hell's worried?" Welling glowered down at Brad. "An' what are you goin' to do? Take the niggers' advice an' leave me to it?"

"I'm staying with you," replied Brad. It was the only thing to say.

THAT day, they felt the fog seeping into their minds and clogging their thoughts. It swathed them clammily and sat on their breathing and chilled their lungs. It veiled them from each other, and the horses were but darker shades in its pervading shadow. Its slow curling folds seemed to conceal mysterious movement so that they often imagined they could see the black figures of Parakeelia men gliding around them. And it shut them in with the evil sensation they were riding along a moving pinnacle around which swam unknown black depths.

Sometimes they were on sand, sometimes on gibbers; sometimes they knew they were traversing hillsides, but they could not see. Occasionally, the ghostly outline of a tree or overhanging rock would loom faintly above them. They let the horses make the pace, trusting the animals' instinct to guide them through the murk.

Mostly Welling spoke only to curse the fog. Never once did he let Brad move away from him. All day he kept Nolan's black stallion alongside the small bay Brad rode and his rifle was always ready.

Once he barked, "You headin' south?"

"We're heading south," answered Brad.

They made camp under a lonely tree of

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which the lower limbs only were visible in the fog. Brad trimmed the twigs off the lowest branch and, slinging the tarpaulin over it, weighted the sides down with heavy stones. He carried in the pack and then climbed the tree to get dry bark and dead twigs for a fire.

The Parakeelia men sprang their raid while he was up the tree. There came a swift rush of silent black men out of the gloom, a yell from Welling as he went down and a whirling scurry that raged under the tarpaulin. Then they were gone and Welling was firing his rifle after them. The bullets spanged off unseen rocks, but there was no sound from the Parakeelia men.

Brad came down the tree with a jump. He said, "They mean business, Jim."

Welling swore blasphemously. He was unhurt save for a few bruises. "The black swine! But they didn't get the sky stone, damn them! What they *will* get is a slug in the guts."

The Parakeelia men hadn't got the sky stone, but they had made a mess of Brad's supplies. His large bag of flour had been taken; so had the bag of dried meat and canned bacon; and salt and tea cannisters had been broken open and the contents strewn on the ground. Welling erupted blistering oaths as he surveyed the damage; but Brad, gathering up what he could, was silent. He knew the real reason for Welling's wrath.

THAT was the second day of the fog. The following morning they found another message stick, similar in appearance and markings to the first one.

"A further warning for me to clear out," said Brad, studying the stick. "And they're coming again. You're for it, Jim."

Welling was red-eyed and weary; he had been watching through the night, watching for the Parakeelia men and watching Brad; But his belligerence burned strongly. His mouth twisted. "They don't bluff me, McCurdie. No niggers ever done that. Give me that thing." He snatched the stick out of Brad's hands and threw it away and stood staring after it.

"Better if you threw the sky stone," said Brad.

Welling spun round in a rage. "For God's sake, stop harpin' on the sky stone. It's mine, I tell you. I'm keepin' it. For once an' all, shut up about the sky stone."

Brad lifted his eyebrows. "All right, keep your shirt on. But you know what to expect, Jim."

They breakfasted meagerly on weak tea and damper left over from the previous night. Brad wanted to conserve what supplies were left, and for once Welling was in complete agreement. Then they loaded the depleted pack and set out on the day's trek.

There was no abatement of the fog, no glimmer of the sun breaking through, no movement of a wind that would drive it away. There was only the impenetrable grey curtain reducing their world to a few feet of soggy ground and wet rock and isolating them from time and space. But not from each other. Distrust and suspicion was as palpable as the fog, and they rode in silence broken only when Welling grated a question about their direction or approximate position.

Brad's rifle reposed in the saddle scabbard, but Welling rode with his in his hands, and he often swung the weapon ready to shoot. But when the attack did come, he was unready. A lithe black form shot up from the ground and landed behind him on the stallion's haunches, and two sinewy arms whipped around his neck. The stallion squealed and reared, and more Parakeelia men darted in from the fog and dragged Welling out of the saddle. He writhed in the mud with the stench of greasy bodies in his nostrils and the fear of their clawlike hands in his heart.

Brad pulled his rifle from the scabbard, slipped out of the saddle and ran around the melee. But he did not shoot. The black men suddenly released Welling and sprang away. Two steps and they had vanished in the fog. Welling sat up dazedly feeling himself. And then he was on his feet yelling like a madman. "The horses! They've got the horses!"

The horses were gone, all three of them. There was a subdued sound or two that could have been the fog-smothered rattle of hooves on stones, and then there was nothing. Welling looked around with the eyes of a maniac. His jaw sagged and he

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was down creeping on the misty ground on all fours. But the Parakeelia men had taken his rifle as well and he soon gave over the useless search. He stood up and towered over Brad.

"This is your fault, McCurdie. You stood there an' let 'em get away with it. An' I know the reason why, damn you! You reckon to crawfish out an' let the niggers get me." He lunged at Brad and grabbed his shoulders. Brad was like a child in his grasp. "You're not crawfishin', McCurdie. You're stickin' it out with me. I'll have your gun for a start."

He wrenched the rifle from Brad and cuffed him to his knees. "I'll have the ammo, too."

"You've got all that's left—in the magazine," said Brad, fighting a lust to throw himself at Welling's throat. That way lay suicide.

"That's plenty. One shot's enough to rip your backbone out." Welling allowed Brad to stand up. He thrust his face forward. "Listen to me, you runt. Long as you're with me, I'm safe from the niggers. I've dropped to *that*. So, you stick with me till we're in the clear. An' then—I'll see what I'll do with you. But you got me into this mess, an' by God! you're gettin' me out of it—me, an' the sky stone, too."

"We've got nothing," said Brad. "No food, no supplies."

Welling's mouth set in an ugly arrogant line. "This weather, I can go three days without eatin'. An' so will you, damn you. Anyway, there's blackfellow's tucker. We won't starve. So on your way. Head south an' keep goin' south. An', so help me God! make one step sideways an' I'll shoot."

PLOUGHING through the fog on foot was a different matter from riding. The horses had instinctively found the easiest path, the safest track, had sensed obstacles before they appeared. But, on foot, you were tripping over gibbers, blundering into holes or fissures, or trying to mount precipices before you realized what they were. And the gloom pressed on you like a dead weight.

Something flicked past Welling's head. Brad recognized the whir of a killing stick. A spear zipped through the fog and quivered in the ground at Welling's side. He glared around, bellowing his rage. Then a Parakeelia warrior appeared for an instant, laughing mockingly and looking gigantic in the fog. Welling fired, but the warrior had gone before he had time to jerk the rifle round.

Brad thought, one word only to the Parakeelia men and that's the end of Welling. They're just out there in easy call and one word would be enough.

But that one word would be his last. Welling would smash a bullet through him the moment it was uttered. Besides, a spear through Welling wasn't the way he wanted to finish off the man who had killed Tom Nolan. So he closed his lips tightly and plodded on.

Welling prodded him in the back with the rifle. "You headin' the right way, McCurdie?"

"I'm doing my best," panted Brad.

"You'd better, McCurdie, damn you!"

Brad had suspected it before; now he was sure; Welling was completely lost.

By then night had come and the darkness was absolute save for the small glow of the fire. Welling, the rifle between his knees, brooded for a time, then he abruptly ordered Brad to take off his belt.

"I won't run away," said Brad.

"No, an' I'm makin' sure you won't," rasped Welling.

He made Brad sit with his back against the trunk of a small tree and with the belt bound Brads wrists behind the trunk. When he had finished, Brad could just move his arms, but that was all. He had no hope of escaping, even if he'd wanted to.

The fire died out and there was nothing but the black night and the dank smell of fog and the wet chill cramping and numbing his body and the monotonous drip of water from the trees. And the fear that Welling's rage might irrevocably slip its tether.

About midnight, the powerful booming of bullroarers broke suddenly across the silence. Brad calculated there were at least a dozen Parakeelia men out there twirling the light slabs of wood that caused the uproar; and, though the noise set his teeth on edge, he was grateful to the black warriors for their presence.

There was no response from Welling. Brad wondered where he was, began to

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sweat lest he had stolen away. Then the bullroarers ceased. A Parakeelia man shouted in his own language, and, right beside Brad, the rifle flamed and the explosion thundered in his ears. The Parakeelia man gave a taunting retort and Welling growled a curse, but did not fire again.

Brad was aware of a prickling trembling relief that Welling was ignorant of the Parakeelia dialect, else he would have taken the bullet. "Noon—The churinga cave," the warrior had shouted. After that, despite the damp and the cold, Brad fell asleep.

WELLING shook him awake as soon as the blackness of night had slackened into dim daylight. "Fog or no fog," said Welling, "we're goin' to be out of the Parakeelia country tonight. An' then they can whistle for the sky stone an' me, too. McCurdie, you got to move today."

Brad stamped his feet and thrashed his arms to quicken circulation. Then they set off, Welling in the rear as on the day before, and the rifle jutting forward menacingly. Brad slowly warmed up, but he did not increase his speed. He was weak and tired; and now, he knew, he had more than enough time. His only fear was that the Parakeelia men should make further demonstrations and so awaken Welling's suspicion.

However, the Parakeelia men made no display, no sound, no attempt to torment them. There was only the fog, dense, deadening, making a perversion of day.

Brad pushed on, fatigue sitting on him so that he lurched as though he had to butt the fog aside. Hour after hour till, at last, the ground in front of him rose sharply, almost vertically and was lost in the gloom. He turned to the right and felt his way along the base of the range, scrambling over dry washes, climbing steep abutments, crashing through the scrub clinging to the stony slopes. Then he turned an acute corner and headed straight into a narrow black gulf that was like the opening of a tunnel.

"Hold on!" roared Welling. "Where the hell are you goin'?"

"There's a mountain in front of us," returned Brad. "What would you sooner do? Climb over it, go round it, or go through the gap?"

"Go on," said Welling.

It was dark in the gap, so dark Welling could just see Brad in front of him. Yet, when they came to the turn where the Churinga cave opened out, he knew where he was. He jumped at Brad, threw him to the ground, his finger tightening on the trigger.

With his back to the cave, Welling did not see what hit him. He went down so violently that he offered no resistance when a big man in wet khaki and wearing the silver police badge in his hat slipped the handcuffs on . . .

Grinning at Brad, Carey the policeman said, "The Parakeelia boys understood your messages O.K. They found me halfway between Nooramine and here, and so, here I am . . . The joke's on you, Jim."

Welling scowled but did not speak.

"A good joke," went on Carey, grinning more widely still. He took from his pocket a slab of wood and indicated one of the squiggles. "That's me, Jim. And the three little rings are the bracelets you've got on. Brad writes messages to the Parakeelia boys and you throw 'em out to them! Wonder you didn't laugh like hell, Brad."

Brad didn't feel like laughing even then. The walk into the gap, while he sweated and wondered whether Carey would be at the cave or not, was too recent for him to laugh. But he did not speak about that. Instead he asked about his gear.

"Horses and pack are waiting for you on the other side," said the policeman. "They're honest, the Parakeelia boys. I've got some tea and salt to make up for the stuff they busted open. And now, we'll be moving back to Nooramine, Welling. Stealing Nolan's stallion and shooting Nolan when he catches you makes them anxious to see you back there."

"One moment," said Brad. "The sky stone. Welling took it. Welling puts its back."

And, despite the handcuffs, they forced him into the cave and watched him replace the sky stone in the little recess from which he had taken it. Brad afterwards allowed it was coincidence, but he thought it queer that the first breath of the south-easterly that blew the fog away should whimper through the gap just then.

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A Long Hate Is Hard to Contend With

STICKUP AT STAFFORD'S

By HAPSBURG LIEBE

THE southbound stage was due in Gold Rock City around sundown. Night fell, three black hours passed, still it had not arrived. There was a new driver, and much of the road lay in rugged territory; young Sheriff Curt Brennan was aware of that; and yet, he couldn't quite throw off a feeling of uneasiness.

Green to the sheriff job, Brennan was on a spot and he knew it. His father had held the office ahead of him; he'd been elected chiefly on his father's record. Failure, to young Curt, would be nothing less than pure damnation.

He got out of his desk-chair, went to the street door, peered into the darkness northward and listened once more for the rattle of hoof and wheel. There was only a clattering of footsteps on the warped board sidewalk. Grizzled old Deputy Ahasuerus Mosby, who had served years under the first Sheriff Brennan, rose in the yellow lamplight.

"Dog bite my buttons if it ain't that bank bookkeeper again, Curt. Undoubtedly it's him. I know his walk."

Curt moved back from the doorway. The bookkeeper came in talking worriedly:

"Sheriff, I've already mentioned that Art Keller was likely on the stage, coming back from Hartsville. What I didn't mention is, Art went after thirty thousand dollars in cash. He didn't want it known. That's why

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I didn't tell you. Something—er, has happened, I'm afraid."

Keller was the big man of the town as well as president of the bank. Curtis Brennan spoke rapidly:

"I get you, bookkeeper. Art figured that the stage might be stuck up if news of that money leaked out. He had no faith in the kid sheriff, meanin' me; never liked me nohow. If you'd told it when you was here before, Hasherous Mosby and I woulda been on the road hours ago. You there, Hash, let's ride."

"Anybody who beats me to a hoss now," the grizzled Ahasuerus said, "will shore hafta be good. Come on!"

In almost no time the two representatives of the law were in saddles and galloping northward out of town.

The darkness notwithstanding, they kept going fast, mile upon mile, until they were in towering rock hills where hairpin road turns made such riding foolhardy. It was now that old Deputy Mosby found opportunity for talk:

"You was sayin' that Art Keller didn't like you, Curt. I'd tell a man, he don't. At that, he likes you better'n he did yore sheriff dad. But, with all his money and power, Art couldn'ta broke yore daddy. He can break you, though, and he will, if you don't hew plumb to a line. Apparently, it's a long hate."

"Sure," replied the young lawman. "Brennans and Kellers just naturally never did like each other. Hew to a line, did you say? I aim to do exactly that. For one thing, I aim to nail these robbers. Because, Hasherous, this is a stickup."

"Well, dog bite my buttons! You feel that way too, Curt?"

"In every bone I've got, Hash," Curt answered.

They lost much time in the hills. Daybreak found them scarcely half a dozen miles inside a wide and almost desert dry, rolling plain. Brennan spoke suddenly.

"Ought to be light enough for us to make out road sign now, old-timer."

HE REINED in and dismounted, hitched his gun-belt to an easier position around his slender hips, started looking for horse and wheel tracks in the sand. So did the old deputy. They found the sign. The stage had passed. But where was it? Gone over a bluff in the hills? Entirely possible!

Still, both Brennan and Mosby watched the tracks as they rode back toward Gold Rock City.

Fifteen minutes of this, and they came to a point at which the vehicle had left the road for a stretch of gravelly land. They soon lost the trail here. But they had the direction, and rode on. After another quarter-hour they topped a low rise and saw ahead, in a grove of scraggy liveoaks, an old and sun-scalded ranch house.

"Stafford's," muttered Curt Brennan. "I'd nearly forgot there was such a place, Hasherous."

"Me too," replied Mosby. "Water failure shore ruint a good ranch when it ruint the Slash S. I'd tell a man. I unnerstand old Staff still lives there alone. But why would the stage stop here, if it did?"

"It did, all right. I see it. We'll soon know why."

The vehicle stood in front of the house; the four horses were tied here and there among the starved trees. As the officers rode up, the long-mustached new driver walked around the back of the stagecoach and narrowed a pale eye at sight of the pair of law badges.

"Hi, Sheriff. We had bad luck. A wheel got rickety. Was afraid to drive fast, and afraid to tackle the hills in the dark, so we stopped here for the night. I've just finished wirin' two pieces o' scantlin' acrost the wheel to stiffen it up."

Brennan recalled that this driver's name was Gilson Henry. He hadn't liked Henry's looks, didn't now. He asked:

"Passengers in the house, still asleep?"

The driver glanced at the half-risen sun. "Reckon so, Sheriff. I been workin' here sence hour or so afore daylight."

The two newcomers rode to the other side of the vehicle and saw the neatly braced wheel, saw also a lantern, still burning, on the ground nearby, and beside it lay Gilson Henry's gun-belt. Brennan gave his rein to Mosby, stepped from his saddle and went to the house.

The stage company's iron strongbox had been brought in and placed on the smoked old living-room mantel. Brennan spoke. Three men sat up on blankets lent them by Stafford.

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"Everything all right with you, Keller?" inquired Curt.

"No—" Art Keller said in a choked voice, staring wide-eyed at the spot where his head had lain. A thickset man of fifty, he was, florid, a little bald, hard of countenance, dressed well. He went to his feet and jerked out, "I've been robbed of thirty thousand dollars, Curt, and if you don't get it back for me—"

"I'll lose my job; yeah, I know," the young sheriff cut in sharply. "I see the strongbox is safe. Why didn't you carry your money in that, and make the stage line responsible?"

"Because I happened to know that the owners of the line are about broke," flared Keller, "and because of the fact that if there was a stickup the strongbox was sure to be carried off—that's why! Well, why don't you get to work? What's the county paying you for?"

Slyly but meaningly he looked across to the other two passengers, who were still sitting on their blankets. One of these was a bony, sour-visaged man of forty or past, in gambler black. The other, much younger, wirily-built, in nondescript clothing, watched Brennan out of slitted, mean eyes.

"You two are suspects. Put your guns on the floor," ordered Curt, his own six-shooter out and ready, "and slide 'em here to me. No tricks!"

HE SPOKE in a voice that carried to his deputy outside. It was Ahasuerus Mosby who picked up the gambler's double-action .41 hookbill and the other man's heavier, single-action .45.

"I know that pair," the long-experienced old Mosby said. "Tinhorn card sharp who calls hisself John Doe, and is a bad 'un. The jigger there with the sidewinder eyes, he's knowed as Hungry Shackleton, and is also a bad 'un."

"I'm allus hongry," said the man who was known as Hungry Shackleton, "Hongry right now."

Brennan turned back to Keller. "Tell me things, Art. How and when did you lose the dinero?"

"Missed it," said the president of the Gold Rock City bank, "when I woke up a few minutes ago. Had it wrapped in a shirt in my brown-leather grip; was using the grip for a pillow. Didn't expect I'd have to sleep out like this! I kept awake for hours and hours, then got so sleepy I dropped off in spite of myself. And I dreamt of being stuck up; seemed that somebody was saying, 'Move a finger and I'll blow your head off.' I—"

"Probably it wasn't any dream, Art," interrupted Curt Brennan. "It sort of registered in your sleep, is my guess. You paid too much attention to the grip, Art, and that's what tipped the stickup off that you was carryin' big money."

John Doe and Hungry Shackleton swapped glances, and out of the tail of his eye Curt saw Shackleton wink. Keller said:

"Old Stafford was a tough stick before he got into the ranching business here and lost out, Sheriff. He's a suspect too."

A scraggly-bearded face had appeared at an open window, and now an angry voice came through:

"So I'm a suspect too, am I? After I loaned you folks all my blankets and cooked the little grub I had fer yore suppers; I'm a damn thief. Long time ago, Art Keller, you could save this range fer me by jest loanin' me money enough to put in wells and tanks. But no. You wanted my cows fer a cheap song, and got 'em by usin' a third party!"

Old Stafford swallowed, and hurried on. "In this here hawspitality I returned good fer evil, as the Book says, and yit I'm a damn thief. I ain't goin' to shoot you, Art, but I shore as hell would like to!"

"Easy, old-timer," said Brennan. To Keller, "The robber, whoever he is, ain't fool enough to have any o' the dinero on

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him. He's hid the whole thirty thousand with the idea of comin' back after it later. Belonged to the bank, of course?"

"Sure."

Next to speak was the sombrely-clad, bony man who called himself, whimsically or otherwise, John Doe. "Sheriff, both Shack here and me would be glad to help you make a search, so's to get going sooner. Hey, Shack?"

"Yup," said the mean-eyed man. "I'm hongry."

"So you two know each other," observed Brennan.

"Met on the stage," blandly said Doe.

"Okay," Curt Brennan said. "The stick-up —or stickups—are not likely to give themselves away by running just now. All the same, Deputy Hash Mosby keeps an eye on the horses, and he's a plumb fine, dead shot—"

"I'd tell a man," quickly said Mosby. "Let's get at it."

"Right," Art Keller approved at once. "We'll go over the house first."

"Wrong!" spat old Stafford at the window. "You ain't goin' to tear up what little stuff I got here lookin' fer that dinero. I'll search the house myself. *Bueno,* Sheriff?"

"*Bueno, Stafford,*" Curt answered, and Keller scowled.

Brennan proffered the gambler's .41 hookbill to the banker, who had a .38 that he liked better, so the hookbill went to old Ahasuerus Mosby as a second weapon. The five men left the house. Curt went first to the stage, and took charge of driver Gilson Henry's six-shooter.

The driver wanted to know what for. Curt told him; he, too, was a suspect. Henry twirled one side of his long mustaches, swore, then laughed. John Doe and Shackleton were moving toward the ramshackle old Slash S bunkhouse. Brennan muttered "Watch that pair, Art," and Keller nodded and walked off. Brennan motioned his deputy to a point a little way from the stage, and spoke in a low voice:

"Any ideas, Hasherous?"

Also in a low voice, Mosby answered:

"I hope it wasn't Stafford, Curt, but I'm afeared it was, dog bite my buttons if I ain't. Only chanst he's ever had to git even with Keller, and the old coot is slicker'n owl grease! Shame, if we hafta arrest him, after Keller treated him so mean. Though you're on a spot, Curt, if we do find Stafford is guilty I shore hope he gits away, dog bite my buttons if I don't!"

ALTHOUGH Stafford's search for the bank's thirty thousand appeared to be both genuine and thorough, he did not turn it up.

"I'll look through the house myself, if the money's not round anywhere else," the younger lawman told himself—and he had a long hunch to the effect that the money wouldn't be found anywhere else.

Keller, John Doe and Shackleton had gone over the bunkhouse as with a fine-toothed comb, with no luck at all. Keller began eyeing a low line of cliffs beyond the dry Clash S creek bed, a hundred yards away. He had just talked with Brennan.

"And so, kid sheriff," he said, "you refuse to search the ranch house except as a last resort. What a hell of a lawman—your dad had you skinned a mile! Well, let's try the cliffs. A rock cranny there might be a good place for a cache. Come on."

"Aw, shucks," grumbled Shackleton. "That'll take all day, and I'm hongry."

"Look, you," Art Keller flung at him. "I'll give a nice reward to anybody who finds that cash, and I won't prosecute. If it wasn't Stafford it was you, Shackleton, or the gambler there, or both of you working together. Better take me up!"

"Yeah?" hooted the gambler. "Say, mister, listen. Who was it figured this so's we'd spend the night in that goshforsaken old house, anyhow?"

"Tough luck figured it," Gold Rock City's big man answered quickly. "The wheel was dangerous. The driver wouldn't listen when I asked to be taken on to town regardless, you'll remember. He said we'd be crippled or killed if the stage went over a bluff. You'll remember that, too."

"Looks like the stickup simply took advantage of the situation, Doe, Curt Brennan drawled.

Moving toward the cliff line, they fanned out. Hungry Shackleton was farthest on the left. Brennan, watching Shackleton speculatively, saw action that seemed decidedly queer. The man halted for the time of a breath, bent over, then vanished behind a thick clump of greasewood. After half a

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minute he rose into sight and again started for the cliffs.

"Wait right there, hombre!" Curt exclaimed, and hurried toward the greasewood clump.

Just beyond it lay a short gully. In this gully there was a little mound of sand and loose rock. He sprang down, and almost in that same instant was back on level ground with a brown-leather handbag in one hand.

"Didn't hide it well enough in the dark last night, and finished the job just now!" Curt barked at Shackleton, who stood facing him. Keller and John Doe also had halted and were looking at him. "Here it is, Art."

"And so now," the mean-eyed suspect said, "I reckon we can go on to town and get somethin' to eat. You feed purty well in jail, Sheriff?"

"Shack, you locoed fool!" rapped the gambler.

Brennan had been so busy watching Shackleton that he had not given much attention to the grip. Keller took it eagerly, then began swearing a streak. "Look at this, law dog," he said, and swore yet again.

In the leather of the bag, which was locked, there was a ten-inch knife slash. The thirty thousand dollars was not inside.

"I get it," Curt said. "Easier to hide the money than the grip. Let's figure a little, Art. Why was Shack coverin' up a grip that had only a shirt in it? Was it left in the gully to sorta throw us off the trail, or just discarded there? And why did Doe call Shack a locoed fool?"

"Suppose you answer that yourself, Doe," Keller said hotly.

The gambler looked mad, didn't speak. But Shackleton did.

"I'll tell you, big fella. Johnny Doe called me that for gettin' caught tryin' to hide evidence that could easy go ag'inst me, innocent or guilty. I couldn't help findin' the thing."

"Slick!" spat Keller. To Curt Brennan, he said, "Shackleton was right on one count, anyway: it sure will take all day to search the cliffs. Before we start that, I want to see how old Stafford looks, and what he has to say, when I show him this grip. Guess you don't mind."

THE four of them went to the ranch house. Stafford was in the front room. At sight of the bag he grimaced as though lazily, and drawled, "Well, Art, I reckon you're terrible pain is eased now."

Keller seemed much taken down. He blurted, "What's the amount you claim I beat you out of in that cattle deal?"

The old cowman sobered. "Forty-five . . . hundred . . . even," was his spaced, calm answer. "Why? Don't aim to pay me, shorely."

"In one way, Staff, I will. The sheriff here can be a witness to my promise. The cash was taken out of this grip and hidden somewhere; you find it for me, and you may keep forty-five hundred of it. Eh?"

Stafford cackled out tantalizing laughter. "Now wouldn't that be somepin'. Sheriff, he still thinks I'm a thief."

John Doe and Shackleton laughed too. The mean-eyed man said, "Oh, Johnny, this is better'n a medicine show. How them rich

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folks squeals when anybody monkeys with their pocketbooks!"

They walked out to the gallery. Brennan sent the two suspects to the watchful care of old Deputy Ahasuerus Mosby, and spoke in undertones to Keller.

"There's one angle to this thing that we've not worked. I'm goin' to sorta play a card outa my sleeve now, Art. Let me have that grip."

He carried the bag toward the stagecoach, Keller following. Driver Gilson Henry was lounging inside the vehicle; he was dozing, or acting it very well. Curt tossed the bag through the doorway and to the seat near the long-mustached man, and said in a brittle low voice:

"See what you can find in that, hombre."

Henry sat up blinking his pale eyes. He saw the grip, after a few seconds noted the long cut in the leather. Still blinking, he put a hand through the cut and brought to light a shining pair of manacles.

"Put 'em on!" ordered Brennan.

He watched Gilson Henry's countenance closely for giveway sign. This sleeve card of his could be a trump, or might not be. The driver's face lost color. But it was anger, more than fear. He threw the cuffs from him and ripped out:

"What the hell!"

Keller, at Brennan's elbow, shook his head gloomily. "Back where we were, Curt. You've messed this pretty bad."

"Maybe so," Curt said. "My daddy used to tell us that it was all right to mess things if in the end you got your man, and I aim to. Let's see Stafford once more."

As he turned with Keller toward the house, he caught the eye of Deputy Mosby and called, "I reckon I don't need to remind you that it's a good time to keep on your toes, Hasherous."

"I'd tell a man, you don't," Mosby replied, and got the idea that a break was imminent.

BRENNAN and Keller walked into the Stafford living-room and Curt closed the door behind him. The sound of their footsteps brought the rancher from somewhere at the back. He halted just inside the inner living-room doorway, didn't speak, only stared.

"Old-timer," began the law's representative, "Art here offered to pay you that forty-five hundred if you'd find the big dinero, as you know. But first—you, Art: comin' down to cold business, I've understood you own a fourth o' the bank stock, which'd make it okay for you to pay that out. Correct?"

"Correct," echoed Keller.

"Now, Stafford," Brennan said, an odd ring of triumph in his voice, "you're goin' to find the big dinero. Maybe it's not such a sizeable wad. In bills of heavy denomination, like $500 or $1,000, a man could carry it on him and nobody'd ever know. Get busy, Stafford, and search Keller!"

The Gold Rock City bank president went chalk white and made a wild grab for his gun. Brennan also stabbed a hand toward the .38, and it was the law man who got the weapon. He clipped:

"Art, you're under arrest for stickin' up your own bank—don't make me drill you!"

The gun muzzle thrust against Keller's midriff took his nerve down fast. Stafford busied himself gleefully. The money was in big bills, half of it around Keller's ankles, inside his boots and trousers; the other half was in flat sheaves inside his shirt, vest and coat. The old rancher counted off the amount promised him, and gave the rest to young Sheriff Curt Brennan. Keller, now all wilted down, was blatting:

"How the devil did you figure that?"

"Real cute," said Curt, "pretendin' you'd been stuck up so as to salt away a heavy stake for yourself. Gilson Henry was a heap upset, y'know. But more mad than afraid. When he bellers, *'What the hell,'* I noticed that he wasn't talkin' to me, but to you! Right then I knew that he was your man, and that you'd agreed to protect him, and that he thought you'd let him down. All right, Art, let's you and Henry go right to jail!"

Old Deputy Hasherous laughed when Brennan told him. He said, "Why, Curt, dog bite my buttons if you ain't as smart a sheriff as yer daddy, and that shore is somepin' to tell a man."

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MEN who wouldn't DIE!

by George C. Appell

Silver Blood

ROGER DI FLOR was an oak-muscled Brindisian who by the time he was fifteen had hacked his way to top command of the Catalan Grand Company of Sicilians who fought for Frederick of Aragon. Having put Sicily in order, he led his wild-faced mercenaries to Constantinople, holding them in line with tales that his blood flowed silver and, hence, they would always be paid. In 1295, Andronicus II hired this daring liar to beat back the Turkish invasion from Asia; Roger wrapped up the enemy in record time, almost losing a leg—and a legend—in the process. A crossbowman took aim and let go, and the flying lance sped at Roger. In that moment, unaware of the weapon, he raised a leg to rest it on a broken beam. The lance cracked into the beam, point pressing against the bent knee behind it. No blood—silver or otherwise—was spilled.

Looking around for new work, he decided to roll up the grandson of Andronicus (who had abdicated because of the Turkish menace). Roger fought a personal duel with the new emperor, killed two bodyguards, sabered his way free to the streets, proclaimed the death of the king, and proceeded to sack the Byzantine Empire. Having done this, he looked east toward Asia. It appealed to him; invaded it, he almost won it. Twenty-four years old, he fought fifty-four battles in eighteen months, conducted one retreat, besieged and sacked seven Turkish cities, and at the age of twenty-five announced himself king of the world. That was too much for the loot-glutted mercenaries; they wanted their pay in silver blood. So the only fight he ever lost was against the legend of his own creation—the blood came out red, and they left him to die.

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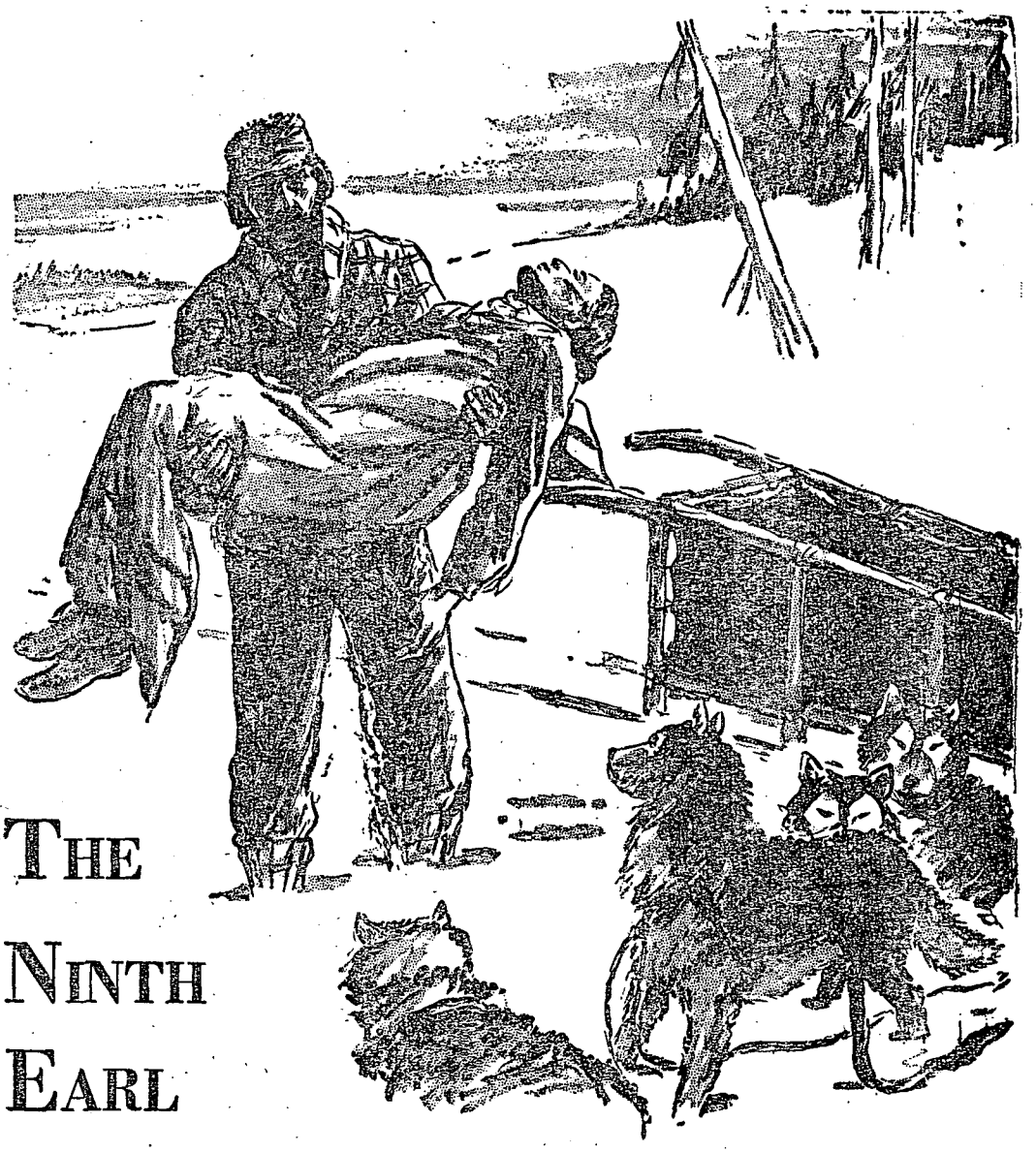
The North Has a Way of Swallowing Up People—but This Man Had to Be Traced and Tracked and Found



THE NINTH EARL

By H. S. M. KEMP

PHIL BRAYTON believes in the old *esprit de corps*. What I mean, since Phil quit the Mounted Police on a superintendent's pension he doesn't forget the men who served under him. So when he wanted a private investigator, he gave me a ring and told me to come up on the run.

I went up, five floors, to Phil's apartment in the Royal York. There, I was introduced to Mr. Charles Hicks, a lawyer from England. In his own brusque way, Phil said to Hicks, "He's your man. Shoot!"

Hicks, thin, with a batwing collar and pince-nez on a black cord, gave me the once-over. He seemed hesitant for a moment,

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frowned, then suddenly became as business-like as Phil.

"All right, then. I have a job for you. I want you to locate the Ninth Earl of Rotherhaven."

Maybe I should have been impressed. I was, but I kept a poker face. "What's he done? Run out on the wife?"

Hicks' frown deepened. "Neither," he said, severely. "This is a case of finding a missing heir. And I'd like some dignity about it."

I looked penitent, said I was only kidding, and asked the score.

But the lawyer seemed dubious. Apparently I'd got off on the wrong foot. But after some prompting from Phil and his assurance that I wasn't as crude as I sounded, Hicks gave me the facts of the case.

"It's the ninth earl we want you to find, but that isn't the title he'll be going under. The man we want is plain John Stoneham."

"John Stoneham," I repeated, and made mental note of it.

"It's this way—" Hicks went on. "The eighth earl, a bachelor, died a couple of months ago, leaving no succession. But he had two younger brothers. The youngest of them is living now in England; the other, John, came out to Canada as a youth."

"And this is the bird I'm supposed to find."

But Hicks scorned the suggestion. "That John Stoneham is dead. He was the black sheep of the family. He had been prospecting in the Yukon and had done pretty well for himself. He was married, had a son. If this son is alive, he's heir to the title. And it's the son, John Stoneham junior, we want you to locate."

I asked when Stoneham senior had been heard of last.

Hicks said, "In nineteen seventeen. A Vancouver paper carried a story of his having been killed in a dynamite explosion. The story mentioned that his wife and two-year-old son, John, were living in the city. But from that time on, both wife and son have completely disappeared."

I did some figuring. "That'd make the boy about thirty-two now."

Hicks agreed, and supplied other details. Until this son of John Stoneham was produced or his death proved, both title and estate were pretty well sewn up. The title was one of the proudest in England and the estate included a rambling mansion, hundreds of acres of park-land and heavy interests in an automobile factory.

"The Earl of Rotherhaven was a wealthy man," Hicks pointed out. "So in fairness to the younger brother, the one now in England, we should get the matter cleaned up as soon as possible.

I looked across at Phil Brayton. Phil smiled.

"Nice little job for your talents, Freddie. You pick it up at Vancouver and go on from there."

"Nice little job," I agreed. "But I may be months at it. And the cost can be fabulous."

But Hicks said he realized all that. "We can't help the time factor, but as far as expense is concerned, that's beside the point. The ninth earl *must* be found—or his death absolutely proved."

WELL, I took the job. Hicks said the pay would be three hundred a month, plus an open expense-account and a thousand-dollar bonus when I got through. Then, for the slight help it could be, he showed me a series of photographs of the dead John Stoneham, taken just before he left England.

I looked at them with interest. They were mostly studio photographs, of a blond chap in his early twenties. The features were good, a bit reckless-looking, but not particularly handsome. The chin was too heavy and the ears, lobeless, too pointed.

"Stoneham ears," Hicks said. "They come out in the family every now and then." He added, "But don't be too much influenced by these photographs. It's not this John Stoneham we're after; it's the son."

I said, "Sure," and an hour later boarded a TCA plane for Vancouver.

My first call there was at the post office; and I drew a blank. No Stonehams were known, nor were they listed in the city directory. But the directory gave me an idea, and I dug up one for the year nineteen seventeen. And under the "S's," I read, *"Stoneham, Mrs. John, Housewife. 362 Bentley Road."*

But 362 Bentley Road was another blank. When I got out there all I found was a modern picture-theatre.

Stumped for the moment, I finally crossed to a house opposite. And from the motherly

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woman who answered my knock, I learned that Agnes Stoneham had moved from Vancouver to Revelstoke.

I, too, headed for Revelstoke, and by using the same tactics, dodged from Revelstoke to Kamloops, from Kamloops to Prince George. And at Prince George the trail seemed to peter out. Agnes Stoneham had died in a hospital there of pneumonia and the boy had struck out on his own.

I contacted the police chief. Did he remember the boy, young Jack Stoneham?

"Sure, I remember him," averred the chief. "Good kid; gave us no trouble at all. But he was itchy-footed. One year he'd be truck-driving down in Victoria; the next, out with a prospecting-crew in the mountains. He liked prospecting. Got it from his old man. But when the mother died, he needed some quick money for hospital and funeral expenses. So he went out of here to the mines."

After that, after sending back enough to square off the bills, Jack Stoneham disappeared. And if I really wanted to locate him, the chief offered a parting suggestion.

"Pass up the cities; look for him some place out in the bush. Out, likely, where the last big strike had been made. If he still has the prospecting-bug, he'd probably want to get in on the ground floor."

The advice seemed sound, so I acted on it. By ship, by plane, by canoe I covered B. C., the Yukon, and finally ended up at Yellowknife, over in the Territories. And here, after making myself a nuisance for a couple of weeks, I finally got a direct lead on the man I sought. An old rock-rat told me that Jack Stoneham was down in the Churchill country, prospecting with a partner he'd picked up.

Now the Churchill country is big; and the name vague.

"Any particular place on the Churchill?"

The old-timer shrugged. "Jes' th' Churchill. That's all I heard."

I was beginning to get a picture of Jack Stoneham. Seven years of Northern police work had thrown me into contact with his kind—tough men, hard men, restless men. Driven by the dream of some day striking it rich, they wove back and forth across the pre-Cambrian Shield, hammering, trenching, blasting. And when in the fall their grub ran out, they turned to trapping so that they might make a stake, go out and do it all over again.

So on a big Doug freight-plane, I headed for the Churchill. And at Snake Island trading-post, I got my hottest tip.

McNair, the Hudson's Bay man, gave it to me.

"There's a Stoneham up around Pelican Rapids, six days north of here. I only saw the guy once, about a year ago. He and a partner were coming down from Yellowknife when they swamped in a rapid. The partner was drowned, and this Stoneham came in to report to the Police."

"The Police?"

"Yeah. There was a Mounty here then, but he's gone now. The last thing I heard Stoneham was married to a native woman and was living somewhere around Pelican Rapids."

A NATIVE woman! The information hit me with a wallop. In my search for Stoneham, I'd always thought of him as the ninth Earl of Rotherhaven. Now, catching up with him, I was going to find him married. To a native woman; a squaw.

"He didn't come down this winter," McNair went on. "Hired an Indian to fetch in his fur and haul him back some supplies. But if you really want him, you'd best head for Pelican Rapids."

The place, I discovered, was off the beaten path. It was more a name, a dot on the map than anything else. McNair suggested a guide and a string of dogs.

But I'd done too much dog-travel in the past to want any of it now. At forty-five a man was too soft, too short-winded for that sort of thing. The alternative was to hang around the post for a few days till I could charter a freight-plane that McNair was expecting in with supplies.

But I had luck, or thought so at the time. A two-place Moth, piloted by a field-man for an Eastern mining concern, touched down long enough to fill up with gas. Being alone, the field-man agreed to land me at Pelican Rapids and report my presence there to the Airways at Yellowknife. Then the first plane to come south could swing over and take me out again.

I jumped at the chance; and a couple of hours later we were circling the Pelican Rapids in search of some sort of human

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habitation. When we spotted it, the pilot drifted in for a landing on the river.

We saw a shack of logs, low, with a stovepipe through the flat roof, a rough-hewn door and a couple of flour-sacked windows. But I paid less attention to the building than to the man who came down to meet us.

He was tall, young enough, with shaggy black hair and a crisp black beard. He wore a faded and patched shirt, overalls and moccasins; and it struck me at once that he bore little resemblance to the blond-looking Stoneham of the photographs. But when I swung from the cockpit, offered my hand and asked, "Jack Stoneham?" he said. "Sure!" and gave me his hand in return.

For a moment I didn't know just what to say; but the field-man simplified matters. "That do it?" he called out. And when I nodded said, "Sure. And thanks a lot," he gave the Moth the gun and in a moment the ninth Earl of Rotherhaven and I had the solitude to ourselves.

Stoneham seemed surprised. "Stopping over?" I told him I was; and he suggested we go on up to the house.

An Indian girl was dragging forward a rough, homemade chair as we entered. With a jerk of his head, Stoneham said, "My wife."

I offered her my hand; she took it limply, then turned to hang a kettle of water in the mud-and-stone fireplace.

My wife. I was curious. I took quick inventory of the girl.

She could be eighteen, twenty, with straight features, thin lips and the high cheekbones of the pure Cree. Her hair, black as midnight, was parted in the middle and pulled almost savagely into a knot at the back of her head. But in spite of it, and in spite of the plain, ill-fitting dress she was wearing, I saw in her something extremely attractive. Then, with a decided shock, I saw something else. Motherhood was close upon her.

STONEHAM took tobacco and papers from a can and pushed the can along the table to me.

"Sit down," he offered. "And roll one."

I had tailor-mades, but the rolling of a cigarette gave me time to line up my thoughts. And for a moment they were kaleidoscopic. I had traveled many a moon and many a mile to catch up with this man and tell him of the title and the legacy awaiting him in England; and now that I'd found him, I didn't know how to go about it.

I even wondered whether or not to go about it at all. The Indian girl, Jack Stoneham's wife, rather complicated things.

But the man was watching me. His own cigarette was burning, and he stood in the middle of the tiny room as though waiting an explanation of my sudden appearance. I solved the matter by tossing a bombshell at him.

"You've a new name, Jack—the ninth Earl of Rotherhaven."

His eyelids narrowed a bit. He removed his cigarette and smoke trickled from his nostrils. Finally he gave a grin, a thin, twisted grin. More to himself than to me, he said, "I thought they'd forgotten about all that."

Briefly I explained the situation. I told him of my long search, of the way I'd run him down. Finally, I said, "So that's the tangle things are in now. The estate's all tied up, and till you go to England, your uncle's left guessing."

He nodded, asked for more details. I gave them to him, and at last he said, "Sure. I see the way things are."

There was a hissing and a spluttering over at the fireplace. It had been going on for some time. It was the kettle, boiling unattended. The Indian girl was sitting on the rough bunk. She could have been some sort of manikin, carved there. And her eyes were on the man.

"She knows English," I told myself. "She understands every word we've said."

Then Stoneham himself turned. "*Sakamisiga!*" he suggested. "Make tea."

She brewed the tea, and set the table with bannock and a chunk of moosemeat. Stoneham apologized for the lack of variety but blamed it on one of McNair's traders who had failed to show up.

I'd eaten bannock and moosemeat before, and the food was appetizing. Stoneham drank tea, but said very little. Yet when I was done, he seemed to have arrived at some sort of conclusion.

"Guess it's me for England. Only thing to do." Then he asked, "How are you getting out of here?"

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I told him about the plane that would touch in on its way south. Stoneham nodded.

"Guess they'll find room for me. For us," he added, quickly. "Can't leave the wife alone here, the shape she's in."

Somehow, now that I'd found my man, I didn't feel so happy about it. It was those complications, that wife of his. I looked into the future and tried to read the score. By all the rules, the Indian girl sitting so quietly on the bunk was the current Countess of Rotherhaven. I tried to picture her in civilized dress, tried to visualize her entertaining at a London soiree. It didn't go so well; neither did the thought of young Stoneham making the trip to England alone. Once he was fitted into his proper niche, would he ever come back? Could he come back? Divorce, and other ugly solutions shuttled through my mind.

And they must have come to the girl; to Stoneham, too. For long after dark, while I lay supposedly asleep in my eiderdown on the floor, I heard him trying to soothe her. "Of course, I'll come back," he said, softly. "How could I ever forget, Marie?"

And I heard her whispered answer. "But they never come back—those white men who go away."

BUT none of us got away. That is, by the southbound plane. We looked for it for a week; and it wasn't till long afterwards that I learned the reason for its non-appearance. The pilot had cracked up in landing and for ten days had hovered between life and death.

Stoneham suggested something of the sort a dozen times. Or that the pilot had forgotten his promise. Finally, he said that he couldn't chance waiting longer. "Marie," he explained. "A few more days and she wouldn't be able to travel at all."

The upshot was that the next morning he hooked his five huskies to a big, high-headed toboggan, fixed the girl comfortably in the canvas-sided cariole, and with me breaking out a trail for him, struck south.

It was years since I had lashed on snowshoes, and I knew the going would be tough. It was six days to the Churchill, five to the nearest Indian camp. That meant five days till we struck a traveled road and I could kick the snowshoes from my feet.

But though I was leg-weary when we made camp that night, I knew the girl was suffering more than I was. With supper finished and the dogs fed, she sat on the spruce-boughs and stared somberly into the heart of the fire. Stoneham tried to get her to talk, tried to joke with her, but when she answered it was only in monosyllables. Me, she ignored completely; but when she looked at Stoneham there was a yearning and a heart-hunger in her eyes that it hurt me to see. I felt like the villain of the piece, a home-wrecker, and I cursed the day I'd run into Hicks and his well-paying job. Better for Stoneham to have stayed with his rock-hunting and trapping and never have heard of his windfall. Both he and the girl had been happy enough then, but right now I could see no happiness in the future for either of them. The Earl and the Countess of Rotherham. What a laugh that was!

THE tough going more than materialized. The snow was deep, even for the Churchill country, and the cold intense. I wasn't too well prepared for the trail, and the frost stabbed through the mackinaw and the moosehide mitts that Stoneham had provided for me. Worst of all was the racking pains that shot through my calves, my tendons and thighs. At forty-five and years away from snowshoes, there was no kidding myself that I was the traveler I used to be. Each step became an agony, and all that kept me going was the fact that travel was as hard and as slow for the dogs. The toboggan, with its human load and its load of grub, dog-feed and bedding, became a steady drag, and even the trail that I broke out was fluffy and soft. Ice formed on all of us—on my coat-collar, on Stoneham's parka-front, on the faces and the necks of the dogs. But though we were enduring hardships, we weren't prepared for the near-tragedy that struck us late on the third afternoon.

We had come to a river. I stopped on the bank to adjust my cutting snowshoe-thongs with fingers that were already numb, and the slow procession went by me. And before I could overhaul it, midway of the river, dogs, sleigh and girl went through a weak spot in the ice.

I heard Stoneham's yell, saw what had happened and blundered out to where he was hanging desperately to the lazyback of the sleigh. Two of the dogs had managed

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to clamber out to firm footing, but the toboggan was overturned with the girl clinging to it, in water to her neck.

"Grab the headline!" Stoneham yelled at me. "Down on your belly and work out to it!"

I did, wriggled back again with the line in my fingers.

"*Now!*" And with a broadside heave, we pulled sleigh, girl and the other three dogs to safety.

I raced for the shore, and when Stoneham got there I was already shoving a match beneath a handful of birchbark and tinder. As the fire took hold, he stripped the sodden clothing from his wife and wrapped her in blankets. After that we cut out a floor of spruce boughs, piled on more fuel and took stock of our situation.

It looked grim. Gone through the hole in the ice was Stoneham's rifle and all of the dog-feed. At our slow rate of travel, the six days would lengthen to ten. That meant we had six more days before us, with slender rations for ourselves and nothing for the dogs.

We faced it. Should we butcher one of the dogs for food for the others, or should we tighten our belts, pray for a miracle and feed the dogs from the grub we should save for ourselves? If we did this, our rations could only stretch for a bare three days; and after that, what?

There's no need to dramatize, to dwell on those next three days. We got up earlier, traveled further between each boil-up, ate so little that we began to grow weak. The girl, Stoneham's Marie, protested that she didn't need to eat at all. Riding, she didn't need the food. And her share, split between Stoneham and me, might carry us through to safety.

Stoneham laughed a trifle recklessly. "You need it more than we do!" he told her. "Both of you!"

On the seventh day we were becoming light-headed. The hills were harder to climb, the rests became longer, and the dogs grew surly and vicious. Stoneham, peering into a near-empty grub-box that night, scrubbed his sunken cheeks.

"Guess it'll have to be one of the dogs. Nigger, likely. He's the fattest."

I rebelled at the idea. We'd wait till morning. Then in a cold that was needle-sharp, we crawled shiveringly beneath our robes.

What a dish, I thought. What a spot to be in! If we did get through—and of that I had grave doubts—Stoneham would earn his legacy. But what of the girl? What was she getting out of it? I fell asleep telling myself she was getting nothing at all. That once Jack Stoneham reached England she'd lose the desperately little she had.

AND then, suddenly, I was awake. From somewhere in the night Stoneham was calling. Calling "Marie!" Calling it at first anxiously, then with frantic insistence.

I sat up, answered him, demanded what it was all about.

"It's Marie!" he yelled back. "*I can't find her!*"

His tone was frightened, near hysterical. In the blaze of the Lights that was better than a moon, I glanced across at the girl's blankets. Then with a clear-headedness that afterwards surprised me, I circled the camp for tracks.

I found them at last, criss-crossed with Stoneham's own. I sang out to him, followed them, and fifty yards away they stopped at the foot of a twisted jackpine.

The girl was there, curled up as though asleep.

We carried her back to camp, Stoneham blubbering like a kid. By the light of the fire that we got going again, we saw that she was unconscious and her hands white-frozen. I gave little for her chances, but after an hour of gentle rubbing, she opened her eyes and looked at us.

Stoneham dropped down to clutch her in his arms.

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"Why did you do it, Marie? To save on the grub-pile?" And then in the same breath, brokenly, "Oh, you little fool! You darn little fool—!"

I choked up myself just about then. I'd seen love in action. And love that was stronger than life itself.

THE next day Stoneham was more than usually quiet. We chewed on the last strands of the moosemeat and washed it down with snow-water tea. Marie's hands were puffy, red-looking. She crossed them across her breast, upwards, so that the blood shouldn't pound into them. And when what passed for breakfast was finished, we started off again.

That was our eighth day; and I told myself that if it wasn't to be our last, it would be because of a miracle. And I was a better prophet than I knew. For in less than an hour, a great four-engined plane came roaring out of the north, circled the small lake we were on and sat down beside us. The pilot of the Moth had come back from death to remember his promise to me.

Weakly we clambered aboard, Stoneham and I. Marie had to be carried. The dogs were chucked in like so many bundles of bones. And when we landed again, it wasn't at McNair's trading store but out in civilization.

I was in a hotel room when Stoneham called on me that night. He was shaved, dressed, and looking like a human being. But he was nervous, ill at ease. I gave him a cigarette, indicated a chair; and after a while he began to talk.

"You haven't said much," he began, embarrassedly, "but you must have been thinking a lot. I mean, about Marie and me and how it's all going to work out."

I admitted it, glumly. "You can't take her with you, and you can't walk out on her. Not after what she did last night. Women are funny," I mused. "No telling what they'll do. As though her little bit of grub could help us—"

"Yeah," he broke in. "But it's all right now. For you see—" and his next words jarred me "—I'm not Jack Stoneham at all."

I just stared at him. *"What?"*

"Jack Stoneham was my partner. He drowned up on the Clearwater. I just took over his identity."

I guess I kept on staring.

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"I knew all about Jack and his chances of some day getting the title. He used to say he wasn't fussy about it though he'd like the dough that went with it. So when he drowned, I—well—I sort of figured I might be able to use it myself."

"Then who in thunder are you?" I asked him.

He shrugged, gave a twisted smile. "Art Hamilton. A guy with no kith or kin. A drifter that hooked up with Jack at Yellowknife."

I stared again at the man, and suddenly it seemed all natural enough. This chap was dark, kinky-haired. He didn't have to be a replica of the original John Stoneham and he didn't have to be blond, but in no way did he bear the slightest resemblance to the Stoneham of the photograph.

I said, "You might have got away with it."

"Why not?" he shrugged. "Who knew him? And they'd never have had a chance to check on me once I got my fingers on the dough."

Suddenly I felt as though a weight had been lifted off my chest. Stoneham, or Art Hamilton, could have been the smoothest impostor unjailed, but now I could have hugged him. And then I knew my job was at an end.

"Could you put it down in writing? I mean, the account of Stoneham's death? And have it sworn to? You've done nothing too criminal so far."

"Okay," he said, carelessly, and stood up. "Let's go find a J. P."

BUT that night, just an hour before I boarded the eleven-forty plane for the East, my man came up to see me again. He was grinning, and he handed me a fat cigar.

"It's a boy!" he said. "And Marie wants you to see him before you go."

"Marie?" I echoed. "Where's Marie?"

"Up in the hospital. And I've got a taxi outside."

We went there, and on the way Stoneham—or Art Hamilton—made another confession.

"I had to tell Marie about it. Had to tell her what a four-flusher I was. And you know something?" he grinned. "Instead of

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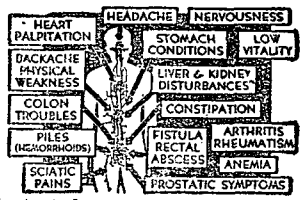

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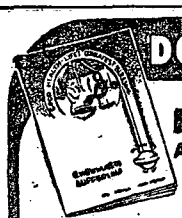

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being mad, she says it's the happiest day of her life!"

And why shouldn't it be I asked myself.

So we got to the hospital, and we walked down a ward and were shown into a private room. Marie's head was on a pillow and there was the shining light of motherhood in her eyes. But what she wanted me to see was the tiny bundle of humanity cradled in her arm.

It was red like all newborn babies but a darker red than most, and though I'm no judge of infant beauty, I could see it was the spittin'-image of the man who stood so proudly beside me.

"Isn't he the dandy?" he asked. "And they say he's absolutely perfect—in spite of all Marie went through!"

I agreed with him, then looked at Marie. At times, on the trip down, I thought I had detected a smoldering sullenness in her eyes on those infrequent times she glanced my way; and it was never in my heart to condemn her. But there was no sullenness now; nothing but peace and quiet joy.

I gave her my hand. "Congratulations, Marie. And I'm sure the little chap will grow up as fine and as swell as his parents.

She smiled, said, "T'ank you." Then after another handshake with my proud and grinning impostor, I turned and left the room.

Perhaps I was thinking more of the parents than the baby, getting my share out of their newly-found happiness. But a few blocks away something suddenly registered in my mind. It concerned the baby, and the one glimpse I'd had of him.

Cradled there on his mother's arm, he was red and he was tiny and he was cute. The fingers of one wee hand were bunched up tight, and his nose was a mere button on his face. But the ear that I'd seen—

It was an odd-shaped ear, a lobeless ear; almost pointed, a bit elfish. The words of the lawyer, Hicks, went hammering through my brain—"Stoneham ears. They come out every now and then—"

Involuntarily my hand went to my pocket. I had to make sure of one thing. Yes; Art Hamilton's statement was still securely there.

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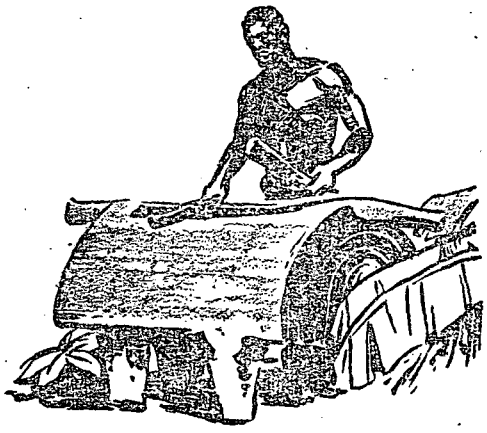
The Story Tellers' Circle



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"DEATH Is a White Goddess," the complete novel in this current issue of SHORT STORIES, is by a writer new to these pages, Joseph W. Musgrave. It is our custom in such cases to get hold of the poor wretch, twist his arm, or in some way appropriately threaten him into scribbling a few notes about himself or his stories for the readers of this Circle.

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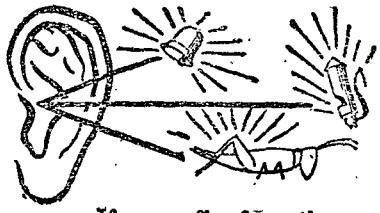

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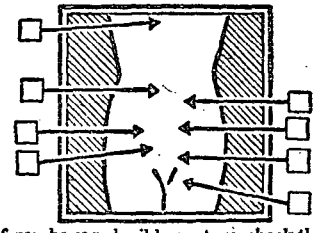

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in at least three small revolutions, a two-year interval of roaming the forbidden reaches of Tibet disguished as a native holy man, and one trip around the world in an open boat with only a Scotty dog as a companion. You can understand that it is only good business for an adventure story writer to have a background of this kind.

"It is with considerable regret, therefore, that I truthfully answer your request for personal notes and confess I'm a more or less normal looking individual, slightly under six feet with grubby brown hair, plain old vanilla brown eyes, sloth-like rather than cat-like in movements, and with a pronounced tendency toward leanness both as to physique and finances.

"My nearest approach to the Foreign Legion and Tibet was a stretch of newspapering in those dear, dead days before it was discovered that young reporters are also people and that with careful training they can learn to use salaries and work a forty-hour week like anybody else.

"As to banana republic revolutions, the only substitute I can offer is nine years in the publicity and public relations business, and for ghastly wounds and sheer sound and fury, I don't know what it hasn't got the old style, technicolor revolt whipped three ways running.

"I can't offer any parallel for the open-boat-Scotty-dog deal, but my beautiful, brunette wife claims that she qualifies completely in that regard, claiming she has been wholly at sea ever since she married me. In the boat with her, she says, instead of the Scotty is our six-year-old son.

"You see, she thought she was marrying a good solid business man, conservative clothes, credit at the bank, one Martini before dinner. Then in mid-stride to becoming a Titan in the world of business, I made friends with a pulp writer. Being a very shrewd operator with all the attributes of a top-notch confidence man, he carefully concealed any evidences of labor in his craft and appeared to spend all his time harassing more honest men with his apparent ease of living.

"About the tenth time he yawningly suggested that I was a dope for not becoming a free-lance writer and living the life of Riley, I gave in and in broken profanity

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told him to suggest something for me to write and I would write it. He suggested I turn out a 30,000 word jungle story. I did. Through some miracle it sold. That was some six years ago. And here I am a free lance writer.

"Incidentally, that same devil's helper is still carrying on his nefarious activities among the innocents in another area. He left town under cover of night before I could fully realize what he had gotten me into.

"I'm a Texan, born in Fort Worth, brought up in San Antonio, and educated at the University of Texas in Austin. My dad was a cattleman, went up the trail, and had a full quota of the experiences you would expect of a smiling, fighting Irishman. My 94-year-old grandmother is Texas itself and the story of her life would turn a Western story writer green with envy.

"The fact is, almost any other member of the family, past or present, would make far more interesting reading than I can in your Story Teller's Circle. Maybe that's why I turned out to be the writer in the clan.

"As to my story, 'Death Is A White Goddess', I meant to write a tale about a shy, middle-aged little clerk and how he reacted when he was suddenly catapulted from a sheltered, hum-drum existence into violent jungle doings. Before I got started, I found that a prime group of crooks had muscled in and stolen the spotlight. Since they outnumbered me, I retired to a safe distance and watched them destroy everything I had planned.

"Then the character I particularly disliked, Dirk Morris, took over the writing himself. Typically, he used the first person singular and made himself the Number One Guy. Don't trust him! Take it from me, he's the worst hypocrite you ever saw, and in my book he's a lot of other things."

JOE MUSGRAVE

How Wang Soo Grew!

Writes W. S. Peacock: "I met Wang Soo (whose 'Frustrations' are explored herewith) fifteen years ago, and, except for the fact he was not Chinese, his character was about identical. He was a camp cook at a resort in Colorado, and in his dreams he

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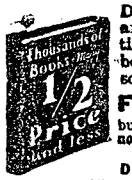

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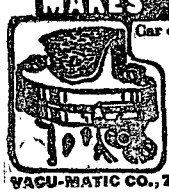

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was another Zebulon Pike, dashing, brave and rather splendid.

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"I recalled his plight when I sat at my typer to write the story of Wang Soo. I wanted to show he was a bigger man inside than out, that he lacked only the opportunity to prove his bravery. I tried to catch his character and his dreams, making him a Chinese, so that he would be alien to his environment.

"Maybe I succeeded; you will know better than I. Anyway, like the cook I met so many years ago, Wang Soo succeeds. Of course, not in the way that the cook did in Colorado, for that was a special thing.

"You see, it was rather trite, and yet what happened proved to the girl for all time that the cook was the man for her. The cook whipped a big drunk one night, whipped him to a fare-thee-well, for daring to steal a kiss from the girl. After that, Pike, Cortez and Captain Blood ranked ten degrees lower than a worm by comparison with the cook in the girl's mind.

"My crowd was glad over the ending, of course. We attended the wedding and chipped in for a wedding present. We saw the newlyweds off on their ten day honeymoon. Somehow, it was a storybook ending.

"I was only sorry that I couldn't tell that story until now. For you see, the ending was strictly in a storybook tradition. My friends and I had chipped in and hired the 'drunk' and set him to do his dirty work. We paid an extra ten dollars for a loosened front tooth.

"But even so, it was worth it. The cook got his bride; we had the fun of playing cupid, and now SHORT STORIES is using the story that grew from that episode of so long ago.

"So have fun with Wang Soo. He's a very nice fellow, and I enjoyed writing about him. And until we meet again in this magazine, *Vaya, Usted, con Dios!*"

W. SCOTT PEACOCK

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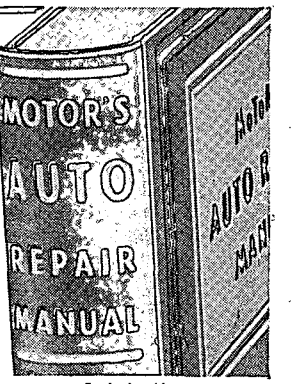

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